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Black Western Thought: Toward a Theory of the Black Citizen-Object

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Black Western Thought: Toward a Theory of the Black Citizen-Object

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Black Western Thought: Toward a Theory of the Black Citizen-Object

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Black Western Thought: Toward a Theory of the Black Citizen-Object troubles and challenges the philosophical category of the human, particularly the black human. Oppositionally reading Enlightenment texts like Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and Emanuel Kant's *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and Sublime*, I extend Emanuel Eze and Charles Mills critiques of Kant and the Enlightenment through relinquishing the quest for a black humanity. This project embraces the abjection of blackness and posits that in the rejection of quest for humanity the black citizen-object reveals heretofore unexplored ontology, epistemology, poetics, and philosophy. Through careful close-reading of poets Phillis Wheatley, Terrance Hayes, Natasha Trethewey, and Jericho Brown, this project explores the political and aesthetic possibility of extending the democracy of subjectivity and presiding intelligence to black aesthetic and intellectual productions. Moving away from the notion of blackness as fear-inducing, funky, reprobate, and disorderly, this project constantly seeks to play with the dark rather than play in the dark. This act of 'playing with the dark' manifests as an interrogation of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in relationship to quantum physics and visibility / invisibility of blackness. The project hopes to shake the very stable ground of the ontology of aesthetics and academic discourse.

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Introduction: The Funk of 'Trouble' and the Sublimity of Blackness

"Why you so black?
cause I am
why you so funky?
cause I am
why you so sweet?
cause I am
why you so black
cause I am
a love supreme, a love supreme:.."
"Dear John, Dear Coltrane," Michael Harper

"I was born…"

The convention of the slave narrative is to start with this phrase—"I was born"—as a means of subverting the ontology of chattel slavery, its subsequent cultural deracination, and the concomitant process of transforming the black body into a fungible object—an object to be exchanged, a vessel emptied and filled at the whim and wish of another. "I was born" articulates a dissent, an oppositional gaze at the cruel institution of slavery and its desire to strip a slave of subjectivity. "I was born," rhetorically, gives the formerly enslaved African something akin to a root, something akin to an origin, something akin to a Deleuzian rhizome in the form of the page, a birth space rather than a birth place. As Melvin Dixon notes in *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, the page and the imagination of the African-American is the place that offered location to their un-location. The page became the place where the geographies of exiles, home, dislocation, and migration could be explored, the place where "Afro-American writers, often considered homeless, alienated from main-stream culture, and segregated in negative environments, have used language to create alternative landscapes where black culture and identity

can flourish apart from any marginal, prescribed 'place.'" (Dixon 2). The making of the narrative, the accounting for one's self—biologically, culturally, and rhetorically—rejects and subverts what Michel Foucault calls the biopolitical, sovereignty, and the racist technologies of the biopolitical and, furthermore, the making of the narrative protests what Achille Mbembe calls necropolitics, the ability of the sovereign to decide that the black body must be the body that receives both a social and real death[1].

"I was born" enacts a linguistic birth, a linguistic identity; a self made through the autobiography, through the act of penning the narrative. Ironically, as Frederick Douglass notes in *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written By Himself*, slaves have no knowledge of their birth date, "never having seen any authentic record containing it" (41). Douglass writes: "By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs…I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time" (41). Therefore, Douglass declaring that he was born "in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland" provides a geographical approximation of his birth as metonymic substitution for an accurate birth date. This geographical account opaquely renders Douglass as an object with subjectivity. Douglass's act of testifying to the earliest forms of deracination and denial of subjectivity (the denial of a birth record), rhetorically, provides his rhetorical self with something akin to an origin. The origin, or birth space of the page, metonymically fills the absence that slave masters and the institution of slavery sought to keep

[1] See Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended,"* ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 239-263. See Achille Mbemebe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003), 11-40.

hollow. However, it does not soothe the wound, but it does give Douglass an opportunity to be born.

I begin with Douglass's rhetorical birth. The birth of this project begins with such a denial: the investigation of the sublimity of black subjectivity and black aesthetics. However, I must note that my denial was of an intellectual and aesthetic nature, and I do not want to co-opt, appropriate, or equate Douglass' position as a chattel slave with my position as a young, black, poet and scholar who learns the way in which his intellectual history is queer, funky, reprobate, and disorderly. On the other hand, I would like my reader to understand that the deracination and invisibility that Douglass faced is the ur-text of my own. Quite simply, Douglass's position, as black chattel-object who does not warrant an ancestry and lineage, and my own, as black citizen-object who's been told to deodorize and tame his own folk intellectual tradition by professors and scholars in the Academy, are in relation. They are kin. They are on a continuum of forced invisibility and misrecognition. Through the act of writing our respective projects and narratives, we place the pen in the gashes and wounds of invisibility. We subvert the social death of the biopolitical through making or fabrication of kin through print, through 'funking up the literary joint.'

I was born, or better yet, I became aware of my funk in my first year of graduate school at Texas A&M pursuing a Masters in English and American Literature. Every graduate program has their general education requirements, and A&M was no different. In the first semester, I enrolled in an Early Romantic Literature class. At A&M, studying Romantic literature required what most graduate courses require—sitting in a room with either no windows or one, yellowed window that

looks jaundiced and arthritic, listening to halogen bulbs pop and crackle above you, and discussing the alleged unassailable and untouchability of "the Greats," the English canon. As Joan Didion notes in an interview with Hilton Als of *The Paris Review* concerning her time in graduate school at Berkeley, "…we [graduate students] were impressed with the fact that everybody else had done it already and better" (http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5601/the-art-of-nonfiction-no-1-joan-didion). Thus, graduate students are forced to banter and argue about what greatness had passed upon the earth before one's time. And this bantering and arguing culminates in what is called the Seminar Paper. As part of the seasonal rites of passage of graduate school (this ritual comes about every fall and spring), one must write one of these Seminar Papers, which is described as a twenty to twenty-five page, article length paper that engages, contributes, and ultimately extends some scholarly conversation relevant to the field; in this case Romantic literature. The Seminar Paper can close-read a text or intervene in matters of canon construction, questioning the very ontology of canon formation. The Seminar Paper, beyond the graduate seminar, provides the student with an opportunity to begin an article that, after much toil and Adderall, becomes something publishable, something to sit on our mother's coffee table next to the photograph book that celebrates Barack Obama's election and inauguration, something that will help said graduate student procure a tenure track position. As we say in the field, it's part of one's "professionalization." In reality, it is the beginning of a graduate student's institutionalization. The halogen lights, the windows, the discussions of canon and canon formation, the seminar papers are the disciplinary technologies of our institutionalization. In fact, we are institutionalizing ourselves (except when we weren't which is the wrinkle in this story).We are akin to the Foucaultian prisoner who disciplines himself or herself even when not being watched or observed; the

surveillance becomes such a technology that the prisoner (in this case, the student) forgets its rhetoricity, its artifice, that surveillance is in fact a strategy, a tactic, a game and thus not real; it is quintessential contingent[2].

Before I could see the products of my academic labors bound in an academic journal, I had to have my paper vetted, my argument's health deduced, measured, and investigated via the mechanism of the student conference with the professor. Like a well-surveilled and trained graduate student I had a portion of my twenty pages ready for the interrogating pen[3]. Blocker 218. A windowless room. The comfort of institution lighting buzzing above us. The professor's salt and pepper head reading through my argument on Matthew Lewis's early, Romantic play "Timour the Tartar; A Grand Romantic Melo-drama in Two Acts." In the paper, I argued that the use of horses on stage, a genre called the hippodrama, along with props and settings that involved invoking notions of the picturesque and the sublime were an attempt by writers like Lewis, Romantics, to embody the Romantic notion of knowledge and enlightenment coming from the exterior, from the outside, from communing with nature as opposed to finding knowledge in books. As Wordsworth ecstatically utters in "Tables Turned: An Evening Scene on the Same Subject," "Up! Up! My friend, and quit your books, / Or surely you'll grow double.//…Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife, / Come, hear the woodland linnet, / How sweet his music; on my life / There's more of wisdom in it" (104). Further, I argued that the use of objects that were normally considered to be objects of nature, objects of exteriority coupled with the form of the melodrama was a subversive act of blurring the class lines between bourgeoisie and working class. Little did I know that this

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[2] See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995).
[3]Here, I can't help but think of Wheatley preparing for her examination in front of the eighteen gentlemen of Boston, and after the examination, waiting to hear if her intelligence was enough or translatable.

investigation into exteriority and objects was the beginning of my interest in the subjectivity of objects, black subjectivity, and the funk of black sublimity. I even managed to drag the hipster fashion of the late eighteenth and early twentieth century as evidence into the paper, examining how aristocratic and upper-class bourgeois gentlemen appropriated the uniform and clothing normally worn by working class, carriage drivers by aristocratic as means of offering playing in and troubling class positionality, thus subverting established and received notions of manners and manner-liness[4].

There, I sat, my head down watching my feet fit and not fit inside the blank linoleum tile. To keep myself from gnawing my fingers back to my elbow, I gave myself the task of trying to figure out the dimensions of the room, how thick the walls were, how many people could fit in the room if we stacked them like pencils. Quite simply, I tried to distract myself because, like most, I do not enjoy watching others read work I have written while I am sitting, there, in front of them. When she finally raised her head, a pair of glasses above a quick and fleeting smile, she praised the theoretical apparatus, the use of Victor Turner, the use of liminality as it related to interiority, exteriority. However, she was confused by the use of the term 'trouble.' She asked what exactly did I mean? She pointed to my use of it in a sentence where I wrote that "I want to trouble the notion of interiority and exteriority." She pointed to another sentence where I stated that 'the Romantics were interested in troubling the notion of propriety and boundaries between the high and low' as was evinced in the use of the melodramatic form and the hippodrama, the use of horses inside a respectable theater venue like Convent Garden. I thought the use of the word trouble in

[4] If time, space, paper, and graduate programs were infinite, I would discuss how this same appropriation of lower-class fashion occurs today with our own contemporary hipsters who wear the uniforms of mailmen and janitors "ironically."

those moments was not only correct but apropos since I was arguing that the appropriation of the lower-class wardrobe by elites was a type of subversive citationality (or so the elites thought), an iteration of identity through clothing and costuming that sought to break from the original context for the purposes of challenging the divisive nature of class distinction in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain. Quite simply, these aristocrats and elites were troubling the entrenched notion of class. I explained to her that 'troubling' something was a subversive challenging; however, it was more meretricious, a bit more nuanced that merely challenging. Growing up in a black Pentecostal Church where the word 'trouble' was used as verb, noun, and adjective and studying the African-American folk tradition of spirituals during my undergraduate education, I used the word often; the word was part of my literary and exegetical lexicon; the word spoke to my own intellectual tradition that, up to that point, ran parallel and intersected with the academic discourses and scholarly tradition of American state colleges and private universities[5].

She suggested I change the trouble to challenge. Here, I would like to trouble her suggestion in a way that I did not almost ten years ago because I felt ashamed, scared and did not have the intellectual tools that I now have. If I were sitting in her office now and she made a similar suggestion I would ask her if she were familiar with the Negro spiritual "Wade in the Water." Was she familiar with the manner in which the word trouble was used in the song? If she was unfamiliar with the song I might ask her to look up the lyrics online or if that were not possible, I would line

[5] In "African Signs and Spirit Writing," Harryette Mullen investigates the black vernacular tradition of religious texts as a way of de-centering and de-essentializing the oral performance of black aesthetic and intellectual productions. Mullen explores tradition of secular literacy as it runs parallel to visionary literacy, literacy that is divinely received. I cite Mullen, here, because the exploration of the black literary vernacular is often over-looked, particularly in black folk culture. The text are only speakerly, orally performed as opposed to enacted through the medium of print and book culture. Because these texts are overlooked, this tradition is virtually invisible. And these texts are particularly invisible to the Academy. Therefore, when students such as myself come from these alternative print and book cultures with their own intellectual legacy, their linguistic contributions to the Academy are seen as foreign, alien, and reprobate.

out the lyrics myself. I might say something about the two lines of the lyrics that state: "Children wade in, the water / God is gonna trouble the waters." I would say:

"This song, sung by slaves and Conductors of the underground railroad who may have also been former slaves, sought to transmit a message of those who hungered to escape chattel via a network of subversive travel. The song subversively announced to those who wanted to escape via these networks where to be ("in the water") and, concomitantly, not to fear the unexpected journey ahead—to wade in despite the troubling that was to happen. Now, if we close-read the text, performing a closer reading of the language, we understand that that this troubling is more than a mere challenging. It something more nuanced, a bit more meretricious. For instance, while the song declares that "God is gonna trouble the waters" (i.e. physically disturb the water), this disturbing connotes much more. It's rhetorically and politically trenchant, lush. Not only is God going to disturb the waters but, concomitantly, God will disrupt the signature, event, and context of slavery. This God will "trouble" the political economies of power that have the children of Israel (i.e. black slaves) in bondage."

I would then explain how the 'troubling' does not end merely in the content of the song, in the song's about-ness, but meta-textually and meta-critically, this song 'troubles' the very ontology and epistemes of Christianity, establishing an agency for slaves and those conducting on the Underground Railroad that double-speaks its plea to an all-powerful God. I would explain further:

"What is even more subversive about this song is its slight-of-hand-Bre'r Rabbit humility. While it might seem, at first, that these black folks who seek their freedom passively wait for a God to

remove them from their bondage, that reading would be a gross misreading and an intended misreading. This purposeful *mis*-singing and *mis*-signing here is similar to what Eduoard Glissant's describes in *Caribbean Discourse*. Glissant argues that slaves "camouflaged the word under a provocative intensity of the scream" so that "it [their speech] was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal," therefore resistant to appropriation and interpretation by the master or ruling class. "Wade in Water" performs a similar type of gesture. The waiting on God to trouble the waters is not a waiting for a deus ex machina. Rather, "God" is a metonymic substitution for the conductors—the Harriet Tubmans, John Woolmans, and Seminole Indians who ushered former enslaved Africans to freedom. The god in the machine is not an actual god but a person. And, while the song seems to reify the complacency that Christian masters sought to cultivate in the spirits and psyches of their slaves, the song subversively cites this material in order to raze the industry and economy of slavery. Thus, 'to trouble the water,' to use the word 'trouble' in the context of economies and discourses of class and power in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century of Great Britain is a much more precise and analytically luminous than the word 'challenge' or even 'subvert.'"

Moreover, I would explain that while the use of the word 'challenge' would be more palatable, more easily recognizable to the Academy at large, the use of the term 'trouble,' in its unrecognizability, performs two services; it broadens the linguistic and intellectual archive of the Academy, and it brings African-American language and intellectual practices, processes, and traditions in relation, a poetics of relation, to British, cultural and aesthetic artifacts and the scholarly discourse that surrounds them. What is gained is a new relationship between these two

discourses, one that previously was invisible. These two discourses being brought into relation make each other more visible in a manner that was heretofore unknowable, unthinkable. While her suggested edit might seem like a small thing, a minor emendation, it is not. I would offer it is this small thing. This minor moment of linguistic ships passing in the night is a manifestation of the greater issue of the misrecognition, mis-hearing, and mis-reading of black intellectual and aesthetic productions and processes. This moment elucidates the way in which the use of a term like 'trouble' creates a cognitive stutter for academics and the Academy because of its alien signature event and context, its alien discourse and discursive history.

'Trouble' obscures the text, renders it funky, non-normative, undisciplined, pedagogically unsound—in need of being brought back into order. Deodorized. 'Trouble' was trouble because it defied the pedagogy of academic acceptability. Rather than understand my use of the term trouble as a move to nuance my reading of "Timour the Tarter," my linguistic choice made the text invisible and aberrant. Rather than reason or grapple with the use of the term, my Romantics professor cast it aside as a type of unknowing or non-knowing, a type of noise, a screech and scream, to invoke Édouard Glissant and Fred Moten, that needed to be fashioned into a melody that she could recognize within her own frameworks of melodic structure. However, in her dismissal and denial, she re-inscribes the exclusionary poetics of the Academy, a poetics that shuns discursive bodies of knowledge from traditions and subjectivities marginalized by the Academy. Also, this dismissal, subtly and not-so subtly, invigorates and reproduces the legacy of cultural disenfranchisement and disappearing that harkens back to slavery. The mishearing of the slave becomes the misreading of the black scholar. The misreading of black scholar becomes the

misreading of the black poet. The misreading of the black poet becomes the misreading of the black citizen-object. These *mis*-es share a continuum, a poetics of relation.

However, the relationship between these two *mis*-es are opaque—one's a purposeful *mis*- enacted by a marginalized group trying to eke out a semblance of agency in a space of social annihilation and death while the other is a disciplinary pedagogy in which the black scholar's body of linguistic knowledge is deemed funky and needs to be brought back into order. What does it mean that one mishearing benefits the enslaved while the later misreading, born out of the first *mis*- , works against the off-spring of that same group? This question exemplifies the fraught relationship of translation, subversive citationality, and competing and conflicting iterative traditions that this dissertation project investigates. This interaction between competing and conflicting discourses and linguistic traditions epitomizes the opaque relationship between a discourse meant to trouble, subvert, and challenge the mastering, the subjugation, the surveillance of a dominant discourse while dis- and re-appearing in hopes of avoiding recognition and incurring more death (both social and real).This negotiation of visibility and invisibility, appearing and disappearing, translation and mistranslation is the negotiation of the subjectivity of black objects. This dissertation project concerns itself with investigating and troubling the recognizable. This project extends the work of Aldon Nielsen, Nathaniel Mackey, Harryette Mullen, Evie Shockley, and Meta DuEwa Jones in area of black poetics and what is recognizably black, what is recognizably black poetry, and who is recognizably a black poet[6]. This project seeks to account for the odd moment when the black poet is told he or she does not write or sound like a black poet.

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[6] See Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997). See Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1993). See Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African*

Anecdote two: in 2006, in my last year in the Masters of English program at Texas A&M, I gave a lunchtime reading. Innocuous enough—a few graduate students, a creative writing professor or two, dull institution lighting droning on above our heads. I decided to read a few sections of a poem that meditated on Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding and evacuation. However, the speakers, personas of the poems were the animals and pets left behind in the slap-dash human scurry to escape the rising waters of Lake Pontchartrain. Simple enough: persona poems. Nothing terribly difficult to grasp from a theoretical perspective. I called it my bestiary and announced it as such. I read the poems. The institutional lighting flickered and popped. All was it as it should have been until the Q&A. As is customary in poetry readings in North America, particularly poetry readings in the hallowed halls of Academe, a question and answer period follows the reading as means of generating a conversation between the poet, the poems, and the audience. The first few questions were pretty innocuous—why don't I use meter, how does orality effect my work, why is history, politics, and social dramas such a fixture in the work. Nothing very difficult. These questions lulled me into the malaise of forgetting about my body and what my black body does to poems and people's reception of said poems when they happen to be in same space. A pre-eminent poet-professor-scholar in the department, white-haired with a white moustache he constantly attended to by twisting the ends, announced to me and the room that I did not write like a black poet. He said it once again, emphatically, and looked about the room as though he expected a white sheet bearing all manner of animals to descend from heaven into our midst. No one in the room gasped, shook, fell over, or even applauded. And suffice it say, no four-footed beasts or angel appeared either. The institutional lighting continued to drone on above us, the halogen bulbs

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American Poetry (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2011). See Meta DuEwa Jones, *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

buzzing into the sluggish afternoon of College Station. I, however, in some shock and mildly amused, asked him to explain. He suggested that my poems were not black because they referenced and cited Apollinaire and other Surrealist French poets. And because my poems referenced and borrowed from the surrealist aesthetic tradition, they were clearly, clearly not black. They just couldn't be. As someone who thinks of himself as a good, dues paying member of the amorphous, ever-contradictory, and ontologically and epistemologically expansive black community, I found his pronouncement disconcerting and shallow.

Hindsight being what it is I wish I would have retorted with "is Gwendolyn Brooks not a black poet because she appropriates the epic form in her long poem, "Annie Allen," which she, herself, called her "Anniad," a reference to the Illiad." Or I should have said: "is Aimé Césaire not a black poet because *Solar Throat Slashed* and *Notebook to a Return of a Native Land* borrow heavily from the surrealist like Andre Breton and the Surrealist movement in general. Does Breton declaration that the Surrealist movement was made most manifest in the work of Cesaire rebuke Cesaire's Martinican, Diasporic blackness? Does Natasha Trethewey renounce the black aesthetic tradition of the Black Arts Movement and the Harlem Renaissance because writes a sonnet sequence with complex metrical variation, a metrical variation ascribed to neo-formalists (i.e white) writers? Does Ed Roberson's meditations on nature contradict and rebuke Amiri Baraka's jazz poetry?" But I asked none of these questions in my second year of graduate school. Again, I didn't have the critical or theoretical chops to dismantle such an essentializing notion of blackness, black poetry, and black poets. I hadn't yet read Gene Jarret's "'Entirely *Black* Verse from Him Would Succeed': Minstrel Realism and William Dean Howells." In this article, Jarrett notes that the beginning of Howells review does not account for the verse but for the authenticity of the black poet who made it.

Howell attributes the success of the verse to the Dunbar's darkness and keen features which allow Dunbar to innately understand the true jingle of his people's voices. Howell altogether ignores Dunbar's more formal, lyrically and metaphorically lush work such as "We Wear the Mask" and "Meadowlark." This type of misreading of Dunbar's work by Howells is similar to the misreading of my own work by the university professor-poet. In the case of Dunbar, his body gets mistaken for the work. Howell willfully inhabits the body of Dunbar as the site of pleasure rather than the work. As Saidiya Hartman notes in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in the Nineteenth Century*, black bodies, particularly in slavery, were sites of pleasures, empty vessels that were an extension of a sovereign's, master's, or spectator's will. The black body, fetishized, was fungible, exchangeable, mutable—literally and symbolically. Thus, blackness became knowable or recognizable as an extension of the sovereign's, master's, or spectator's "terror, desire, fear, loathing, and longing" (Hartman 7). Therefore, in the case of Dunbar, Dunbar is knowable for Howell only as an extension of Howell. Dunbar becomes Howell's Dunbar, property of Howell's critical plantation—(I mean)—imagination, apparatus, and theater.

Dunbar becomes visible, see-able, knowable through critical commodification. Through Dunbar writing in dialect, a knowable and acceptable form of black speech, black discourse, Dunbar's work manifests the blackness that's palatable for Howell and the literary establishment of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. However, I am also interested in Howell's refusal to engage the more formal verse, the verse that did not jingle in the plantation tongue, the verse that resisted commodification because it is this verse that interrupts the grammars and technologies of knowing. Howell's refusal prefigures and anticipates the poet-professor at Texas A&M telling me that my poems are not black. The black poems that I offered that afternoon defied

what he thought of as recognizably black. They did not articulate a commodifiable blackness, one that had been well-trafficked, accepted, and publicly-sanctioned. Like Dunbar's formal black verse, my poems defied their prescriptive and proscriptive fungibility, thus articulating something that was out-of-bounds and sublime. The poet-professor's inability to articulate anything other than the fact that he felt these poems I presented were not black poems elucidates the way in which black poetry and black aesthetic productions stupefy the critical apparatus of academics and the Academy and defy reducibility. The black poem becomes illegible, obscured, and opaque because of its proximity to the black body.

The investigation of the opacity of the black body in relationship to the knowable, the Enlightenment's notion of the human, and the discourses and economies of the Academy saturates this project. Engaging with and yet departing from Saidiya Hartman's notion of black as alien or foreign appendage grafted onto the state body of the U.S. post-slavery, Karl Marx's subjunctively imagined speaking commodity, Charles Mills's sub-personhood, Bruno Latour's nonhuman, and Eduoard Glissant's opaque citizen, I posit that blackness and black people manifest a subjectivity that is akin to the subjectivity of humans. However, it is not human. It is a subjectivity of objects, nonhumans, that of the subjunctively imagined commodity. I depart from the notion that because slavery ended black objects became black people. The Emancipation Proclamation (which legal scholar Patricia Williams calls the un-owning of slaves), amending Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution that declared black slaves "three-fifth of all other persons," and the passing of Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1875, 1964, and 1968 and so on and so on—these legal and juridicial acts do not absolve or remonstrate the slave of the historical, linguistic, or popular cultural representation and legacy of their object-ness. As Saidiya Hartman notes the negotiation of the grafting of the

alien, black object onto the political body of the U.S. was harrowing. Concerns of social and political hygiene—how might the disorderly, funky, reprobate, potentially diseased black body infect the polis, the State—dominated conversations of integrating black bodies into the country at large. Though I agree with Hartman's anaylsis, I would like to complicate it a bit by problematizing or questioning what narrative is hierarchized and aggrandized in the narrative. I want to question how Hartman's analysis re-inscribes the supremacy of the modern and the Enlightenment notion of the human. I argue that Hartman's scholarly accounting of this negotiation subsumes the discussion under the rubric of human or the making of the human. In other words, Hartman positions her discourse and the discourse surrounding the alien slave body to be an investigation of a position of the human, even if not fully human. Hartman subordinates the nonhuman to the greater and grander narrative of the black object becoming human; the abjection of the black object is cleaned up via the metanarrative of tracing the evolution of the grafting of the black body onto the "national body," thus, pushing the exploration of the black object's ontology and epistemology to the margins. Even as the technologies of biopolitical racism are adroitly and methodically explored, they are explored via the discourse and discursive possibilities of the human rather than via the discourse and epistemologies of the nonhuman, the object. In my argument for dismantling the notion of black people as human, I engage the ongoing conversation of this type of philosophical troubling, the troubling of subjectivity equated with personhood and human, started by Fred Moten in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition.* Moten begins with his investigation of the anarrangements and irruptions that blackness causes to the grammars and technologies of Western knowing in his declaration that "the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval…—is a strain that pressures

the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity (1). Therefore, blacknesss troubles, resists, subverts, and challenges the relationship between the legal and philosophical category of human and the notion of subjectivity. Coupling Moten's declaration with Bruno Latour's challenging of Enlightenment notions of modernity and the human/nonhuman divide, I extend upon both arguments in this project arguing that the human never existed. To borrow, cite, recite, and signify on the title of Bruno Latour's tome on the subject—we have never been human, and we have never been modern. And what does this mean for the art, poetry, and aesthetic productions of the black citizen-object? How would these aesthetic productions be understood, encountered, read, and interpreted, or better yet, misunderstood, mis-encountered, mis-read, and misinterpreted by critical apparatuses created to encounter *human* aesthetic and intellectual productions? This project intervenes in this conversation through its exploration of flexible subjectivity of black artists and scholars like W.E.B. DuBois, Phillis Wheatley, Éduoard Glissant, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Terrance Hayes, and Jericho Brown, scholars and poets who negotiate subjectivity of their objectness and the cultural, linguistic, and philosophical inheritances, archives, and legacies of that position. This project seeks to move beyond the recognizable discussions of double-consciousness, liminality, betwixt and between-ness that have proliferated in conversations surrounding the study of black literature and culture. This project plays in the dark rather with the dark.

Decentering, de-stabilizing the recognizable does not end merely in its analysis and inquiry. The project also interrogates and troubles what exactly is a black intellectual tradition and who might be considered a black scholar, artist, and scholar-artist. For instance, in Chapter 1, I begin with one of W.E. B. DuBoise less discussed chapters in *Souls of Black* Folk, "Of the Coming of John." "Of the Coming of John" is not what might be understood to be a standard academic paper

or chapter. It does not offer a thesis, or argument, with evidence and analysis. Instead, DuBois offers us an allegory (an anticipation of the methods of inquiry and discourse for critical race theory perhaps?) of two Johns who travel from their southern hamlet called Altamaha to receive education. Both Johns come back after college and disaster ensues. "Of the Coming of John," I argue, straddles the line between the critical and creative. DuBois occupies both scholar and artist in this paper. This hybridity of reading scholars as artists and artists as scholars continues in Chapter 3. In Chapter 3, I use Toni Morrison's William E. Massey Sr. Lectures at Harvard as a theoretical lens to produce a reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and, concomitantly, to create my own theoretical apparatus to read the slippage between black visibility and invisibility. Using Morrison's lectures in this manner, I also trouble the notion of who can be scholarly, who is a scholar, and what scholarly conversation is. Throughout the project, I challenge the ways in which the Academy knows itself through its discursive practices and practices of discourse. I trouble the notion of scholarly conversation—its formal, political, and aesthetic givens. Just as Nietzsche challenges the contingent metaphors, metonymies, tropes, and anthropomorphisms of truth, this project performs a similar interrogation of the narratives and meta-narratives of academic discourse.

Chapter 1 begins this inquiry into the meta-narratives and politics of academic discourse and discursive bodies of knowledge with a discussion of the form of criticism. Employing Terry Eagleton's analysis concerning the function of criticism, I question the efficacy of the form, the critical essay, when encountering black aesthetic productions. Eagleton notes that the form was used by the British bourgeois "to carve out a distinct discursive space," one that resisted the autocracy of aristocracy and concomitantly rebuked the transgressive, that which is aberrant (9). I posit that if the goal of criticism was to shun the transgressive, the aberrant, then criticism, as a

discursive practice, would have a difficult time encountering the work of those that are considered aberrant and transgressive. This opening move of questioning the efficacy of the criticism helps to further complicate the endeavor of the project. I signify on the very intent of this intellectual exercise as a means of investigating the liminality of black artists-scholars who seek to explore the aesthetic and intellectual productions of black folks. The chapter builds upon this complication by examining W.E.B. BuBois' "Of the Coming of John," a chapter from *Souls of Black Folks.* The close-reading of "Of the Coming of John" demonstrates the struggle of the black scholar to grapple with conflicting pedagogies—that of the "Academy" and that of the "street" or "folk." Engaging and departing from Lindon Barrett's discussion of the dialectic of the "Academy" and "the street" in *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*, I interrogate the way in which the Academy and academic discourse render and represent folk discourses and pedagogies as disorderly, funky, and queer. Queer is used in this project as a way of discussing the non-normative, that which is seen as askew, off, not quite right. In using queer in this manner, it opens up queerness in the tradition of E. Patrick Johnson's *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity,* Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," and Jose Munoz's *Dissidentifications.* Associating queerness with sexual practice only reduces and sequesters queerness, enacting a marginalization. Quite simply, the queer is everywhere, particularly in black communities where sexuality, race, and the non-normative inform notions of the straight, the heteronormative, normative ideas of family, home, community, aesthetics, and intellect. This chapter posits that blackness, particularly a folk iteration of blackness, is queer and with that comes a particular ontology, epistemology, history, pedagogy, and technology. These non-normative, queered pedagogies and epistemologies deform and perform a deformation of Western,

Enlightenment notions of mastery. Engaging scholars like Houston Baker, Karl Marx, Bruno Latour, Eduoard Glissant, Fred Moten, and Hortense Spillers, this project argues for embracing and investigation of this abjection, this queer thinking. In embracing the political and intellectual possibilities of this queer thinking, this project seeks to answer and respond to Bruno Latour's call in *We Have Never Been Modern*—extending democracy (of subjectivity) to the nonhuman, the object. Whereas Moten locates the exploration of the abjection of black objecthood in the avant-garde and the recognizably radical, I expand and complicate his location of the embodiment of black object-ness to the realm of the formal and banal. Through close-reading Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* I argue that it is not just the black avant-garde or the black radical art production that is stultifying to modernity and Enlightenment technologies of knowing, but everyday blackness, in and of itself, stultifies, arrests, and terrorizes Enlightenment technologies of knowing.

Chapter 2 continues with this line of examination, moving from the Burke's *Enquiry* to his contemporaries Phillis Wheatley and Thomas Jefferson. This chapter complicates and critiques much of the analysis put forth by literary critics like Henry Louis Gates, Vincent Caretta, and Honorée Fanon Jeffers concerning Thomas Jefferson's dismissal of Wheatley. Framing the discussion of Thomas Jefferson's dismissal with Moten's discussion of Marx subjunctively imagining the commodity speaking and then dismissing his imagining as impossible, I offer that Jefferson's famous and now infamous dismissal is not Jefferson's reluctance to grant her full humanity but Jefferson's decision not to extend democracy to the nonhuman. Jefferson does not extend democracy to Wheatley because he cannot imagine an object that has a subjectivity and that subjectivity will be expressed through the discourse of akin to human discourse. I also argue that

critiquing Wheatley concomitantly critiques slavery and introduces the ontological and epistemological conundrum of how might a commodity—an object—bring itself into the market, into the economies of exchange, discourse, and property. Riffing upon the ontological question of how can a runaway slave steal him or herself if that slave is truly property (i.e. how can property steal property?), I offer that Wheatley produces a similar conundrum for Jefferson. How does property create property? Her poetry, her body produces in and for Jefferson an intellectual and aesthetic stutter. This stutter does not end in those that would not acknowledge her subjectivity, but Wheatley's gendered body produces a stutter for the general public as evinced in the necessity for a prefatory letter by eighteen gentlemen of Boston that attests the fitness of the text. This letter, which Hazel Ervin, considers the first-piece of African-American literary criticism functions as a tidying up of Wheatley's body[7]. The Attestation tames the potential terror and sublimity of Wheatley's body, which is also offered in the paratextual material (the frontispiece, a wood-carving of Phillis Wheatley pensive at her writing desk). The "To the Publick" statement also affirms that the work will subscribe to bourgeois manners and mannerliness. The letter moves Wheatley into the realm of author but only through careful surveillance and symbolic sequestering. Even for the abolitionist-heavy, northern sensible, Boston Brahmins, Phillis Wheatley's body always contains a shriek. And it is that shriek that the public must be guarded against. Then, I interrogate the implications of calling the "To the Publick" address the first piece of African-American literary criticism. If this letter is considered the first piece African-American literary criticism, I posit that this letter sets up a critical conversation that is interested in bringing the black body and black

[7] See Hazel Ervin, *African American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 9-10. Dr. Ervin not only wrote this, but she also voiced this insight often. As a student of Dr. Ervin who was taking a Harlem Renaissance class with her the semester this book was published, I often heard her exclaim that the eighteen gentlemen of Boston produced one of the first pieces of African-American literature.

poetry into subjection, into order. The critical conversation of African-American literature becomes a criticism of black bodies thus pushing the poems, stories, and plays into the margins. This letter anticipates William Dean Howells body-centric critique of Paul Laurence Dunbar which anticipates Louis Simpson's critique of Gwendolyn Brooks which anticipates Helen Vendler's critique of Rita Dove's editorial choices in Penguin's recent anthology of twentieth century American poetry which anticipates Marjorie Perloff's most recent critique of Natasha Trethewey in the *Boston Review* (May/June 2012)[8]. These examples elucidate the diverse and countless ways the black body is always-already shrieking. Here, I take up Moten's notion of shrieking as an anarrangement of the logics of the Enlightenment, but I also depart from him in that all of these examples of black shrieking are performed and articulated poets who would not be considered avant-garde at all. I offer that Moten's relegating Aunt Hester's shriek to the avant-garde and the radical removes its everydayness, its banality. It also detaches it from the folk, divorcing it from a pedagogy that is itinerant, accessible, and that often intersects with the formal. Then, I argue for putting the Aunt Hester's shriek and the shriek of slave women being whipped in relation to the avant-garde. Putting these two pedagogies into relation creates a surreal intellectual practice that I

[8] In a review in the New York Herald Tribune Book Review, Louis Simpson made a disparaging comment concerning the subject matter of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry. He wrote: "Gwendolyn Brooks *Selected Poems* contains some lively pictures of Negro life. I am not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware that he is a Negro; on the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important." This type of dismissive commentary about the "value" of black lives in literature does not stop in the 1960s. In the November 24th issue of the *New York Review of* Books, Helen Vendler, a professor at the esteemed Harvard University, critiqued and disparaged the editorial choices of Rita Dove for the Penguin Anthology of American Literature. She dismissed her choices as being too "sociological" (i.e. too many people of color), and, not wanting to leave the space of the article without offending everyone, she argued that there was too much "glitter" (i.e. too many gay poets included) in the anthology. And most recently in the May/June 2012 issue *Boston Review*, Marjorie Perloff critiques Natasha Trethewey's "Hot Combs" for being too identity and experienced based. See Louis Simpson, "Taking the Poem by the Horns" (*New York Herald Tribune Book Week*, 27 October 1963). See Helen Vendler, "Are These the Poems to Remember" (*New York Review of Books*, 24 November 2011). See Marjorie Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric (*Boston Review*, May/June 2012). See Honorée Fannone Jeffers, "The Subjective Briar Patch: Contemporary American Poetry" (*Virginia Quarterly Review* 88.2 (2012)), 97-106.

call Black Western Thought, a troubling and subverting of the human as supreme. Black Western Thought is the articulation of an intellectual tradition that embraces the abjection of blackness and black objectness without seeking to bring its subjectivity, ontology, epistemologies, poetics, or philosophies into order, into the order of human.

In Chapter 3, I enact this critical gaze through the reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Employing Eduoard Glissant's notion of opacity and Toni Morrison's inquiry into black abjection, I play with the dark as opposed to playing in the dark. In other words, I perform (as scholar, artist, and scholar-artist) alongside Ralph Ellison and his investigation of the (in)visibility of blackness. Performing what Moten terms an "*a*calculation of function," a reading that occurs on a continuum of reading and transcription, I investigate the sonic and visual elements of the Prologue that seeks to explore the ontological slipperiness of blackness. This reading of Ellison's *Invisible Man* also explores blackness as a type of improvisation through the use of call and response. I posit that call and response not only subverts Western notion of text and textuality, but it also troubles Western notions of authority and history.

Chapter 4 extends the conversation of the slipperiness of black ontology through a close-reading of Terrance Hayes' "Woofer (When I Consider the African American) in his third book, *Wind in a Box*, and Jericho Brown's "Again" and "Betty Jo Jackson" in his first collection, *Please*. Using the trope and philosophical frame known as aporia—true or feigned doubt or metaphysical indeterminacy, I argue that Hayes and Brown use doubt as a means of subverting traditional notions of authority while reifying a more postmodern, post-structuralist form of authority. Through the agglomeration of fragments, through subjunctive imagining about the concreteness and instability of race, Hayes and Brown build a poetry tradition that seeks to de-essentialize origins and antecedents

based solely upon race. Both poets exhibit a heteroglossic tongue, one that can meditate lyrically on Plath and pecan pie, Borges and bling. In this chapter, I argue that this multi-tonguedness creates a reading experience where Hayes and Brown want to challenge what it means to read and be read.

A Question of Freedom / A Question of Form

This dissertation project takes a peculiar form because of its twin aims—to be both overtly critical and overtly creative. The enactment of that dual aim contradictorily reaches back even as it lurches forward. The scholarly meditations are not conventional in that they beckon back to Plato's *Republic* and the anti-slavery dialogues in abolitionist pamphlets of early America. Like Daniel Coker's "A Dialogue Between a Virginian and an African Minister," I inhabit multiple personas for the purpose of playing out a contentious discussion on the ontology of race and subjectivity. For instance, in this project, there are three characters—two interlocutors who query, challenge and help a third. The two interlocutors names are Dr. Bledsoe, of *Invisible Man* fame, and Cousin Leroi, a riffing and signifying on Amiri Baraka. Dr. Bledsoe embodies the ACADEMY; he's uncritically interested in the conventional forms of making knowledge. I have performed a literary lobotomy of sorts. I have cut Dr. Bledsoe from the text of *Invisible Man* and re-imagined him as a dissertation chair of graduate student's committee. How would seek to bring this graduate student into the order of the conventionally academic? How would he traffic in ideas of abjection? Dr. Bledsoe's presence represents the conventionally authoritative. Conversely, Cousin Leroi does not. Cousin Leroi amasses knowledge and theorizes from below. He's interested in a type of ensemble construction of knowledge that is less the Academy and more the jazz combo or the rap cipher. For

Bledsoe, the assembling and the ensemble of knowledge occur mostly in an academic environment (i.e. books, libraries, colloquiums).

Betwixt and between these two nodal points of knowledge making is our third character, Squire Reeves. Squire Reeves is a Ph.D. candidate in the throes of writing his dissertation. He consults both Dr. Bledsoe and Cousin Leroi because he endeavors to bring together both the Academic and the street (i.e. the folk). While trying to perform this coalescing would prove difficult enough, Squire Reeves also faces another dilemma. He does not believe in scholarly apparatus. He's suspicious of the materials of the academic trade. The essay, literary criticism, cultural criticism, and philosophy smack of disenfranchisement. However, Reeves understands the necessity of black scholars and black scholars to reside in the Academy. Squire Reeves embodies the dilemma that many black academics face—how does one negotiate the surreal funk of ancestry and the sanitation efforts of the Academy.

This dilemma not only animates Squire Reeves fictional dilemma, but it also animates this dissertation project. This project wants to bring embodiment back into scholarship. Too often, scholarship appears oracle-like on the page, the scholarly voice so disembodied that the text seems to have come out in one long stream of organized thought. This one, long stream of organized thought lacks the stutters, motions, and corporeality that also participate in scholarly ruminations. Using the narrative apparatus of the dialogue, I hope to dislodge the scholarship from seeming like a pronouncement from the Great Out There. In offering it the embodiment of flesh, I also hope to bring it back toward the public, the everyday, the banal, the vulgar.

Chapter 1: Queer Pedagogies of Blackness, Queering Pedagogies of Blackness

AT RISE

Int. Literally, interior. The drama unfolds inside of the head of Squire Reeves. The setting should thus reflect a head space—something Dali- and Basquiat-esque. Lots of books—on shelves, in arcs and rainbows all over the stage. A large pocket-watch-looking clock should be draped over a tree. Brass and woodwind instruments should be piled high just right of center stage. On the left side of the stage, should be jazz band. They will play intermittently throughout the drama. They are muse, music, and ancestors (chorus). The stage should appear crowded, but everything occupies its place even in its disheveled-ness. Facing the audience, Squire Reeves sits, center stage, at a desk that resembles a vanity except this vanity does not contain a mirror. Dr. Bledsoe sits on a very, very tall chair behind Squire Reeves. A lectern sits on stage left.

SQUIRE REEVES

How should I begin? "'At the very start,' they cried (Ellison 9)."

DR. BLEDSOE

(*Gets out of his chair and comes down to where Squire Reeves sits.)*

Squire Reeves, must I remind you that this is a serious project?

SQUIRE REEVES

Is that you, Dr. Bledsoe?

DR. BLEDSOE

Yes, it is, and let me remind you that the fitness of your intellectual career will be judged by this document. Therefore, I would take it most seriously.

SQUIRE REEVES

(Mocking Dr. Bledsoe)

Most seriously.

Yes, Doc. Yes, you're right. But through that signifyin(g)[9] allusion to Ellison's *Invisible Man*, I was announcing the rhetorical, intellectual, ontological and epistemological territory of this chapter—the kin, kind, and aesthetic lineage I seek to engage and play with. It was a gesture and an utterance, something at once physical and intellectual. I wanted to announce that this essay and this project would use a heteroglossia of voices, influences, and ideas. This essay will and would resist the conventions and gestures associated with academic discourse while inhabiting many of them. I was announcing that this essay seeks to occupy many different modes of theorizing, speaking, singing, signing, and signifying.

DR. BLEDSOE

[9] Here, I am invoking a type of cultural signification that Henry Louis Gates describes in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism.* In *The Signifying Monkey,* Gates discusses a type of troping of language by African descended people, a troping through repetition with difference. Gates argues that African-American writers learn to write by reading Western, canonical literature; however, African-American writers will mimic and gesture toward the Western canonical traditions, but they will do so in a manner that seeks to talk-back, challenge, or even subvert the canon's authority (read: power). This (s)ignification is done through parody, pastiche, puns, and whole slew of tropes. Often, this talking-back empties out the sign, creating multiple and often contradictory meanings. Gates gives this account of African-American signifyin(g): "Some black genius or a community of witty and sensitive speakers emptied the signifier "signification" of its received concepts and filled this empty signifier with its own concepts. By doing so, by supplanting the received, standard English concept associated by (white) convention with this particular signifier, they (un)wittingly disrupted the nature of the sign = signified/signified" (46). This interruption is more than a mere "colonization of a white sign;" it is an inventive process that defies and breaks from the previous citational chain. Signifyin(g) creates a multiplicity of meanings (47). Signifyin(g) reaches back and forward at the same time, linking one to a linguistic, literary, and historic past while at the same time breaking from it through the re-structuring and re-making of the sign.

Well, that's all well and good, but why don't you begin with an introduction that shows that you are conversant with the modes and manners of the essay, conversant with the historical background and conversation of your argument? Before rending the very fabric of form, why don't you show that you understand it, have a mastery of it? Why don't you occupy it? If I have taught you anything, it is that something must be inhabited before it is discarded.

SQUIRE REEVES

Doc, do I need to go to prison before I decide that prison jumpsuits don't do anything for me?

DR. BLEDSOE

Well no. What I was saying, what I mean to say is that the form of the essay has served many of scholars and thinkers before you.

SQUIRE REEVES

Doc, that's all fine and good, but we can't forget that the essay and contemporary criticism are a conservative enterprise that rebukes transgression. Have you read Terry Eagleton's *The Function of Criticism*?

DR. BLEDSOE

No, well, no, but I don't see how this Terry Eagleton—

SQUIRE REEVES

Well, Doc, Eagleton investigates the function of criticism historically. He traces the way in which thinkers and critics sought to oppose the absolutist state through arguments that were based upon evidence and observable data as opposed to the "arbitrary diktats autocracy"—the monarchic

regime's preferred method of settling arguments and questions (Eagleton 9). As Eagleton notes in *The Function of Criticism,* even as modern criticism "was born of struggle against the absolutist state," modern criticism also became a tool to unify the ruling class to help create a sense of culture (9). Thus, criticism became "a reformative apparatus, scourging deviation and repressing the transgressive" through appealing to standards of universal reason (Eagleton 12). Now you're probably asking yourself what this might have to do with the price of eggs or this project that seeks to investigate the narratives and metanarratives of African-American criticism and criticism in general.

DR. BLEDSOE

I am asking myself something similar to that, Squire. I probably wouldn't have used the cliché, that language about the price of eggs and all, but well, I am wondering why all this talk about the essay and criticism as genre, as form.

SQUIRE REEVES

I am doing all this talking, as you say, because I would like to trouble the essay as a form and criticism as a genre. I want to think about and think through the essays limits. What can criticism encounter, and what will criticism mis-encounter?

DR. BLEDSOE

What do you mean?

SQUIRE REEVES

What I mean: if modern criticism and its subsequent tradition as promulgated by writers like Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, and Joseph Addison, writers who sought to reify a conservative sense of substantiating public opinion, opinion that sought to "scourge deviation" and 'repress the transgressive,' then how would this tradition, this mode of writing and thinking deal with black intellectual and aesthetic productions, especially since blackness is considered by many Enlightenment thinkers to be sublime, transgressive, stultifying, and deviant? To rephrase a question that you asked earlier: how could I not rend the very fabric of the form?

DR. BLEDSOE

What do you mean?

SQUIRE REEVES

Doc, it's simple.

DR. BLEDSOE

Please enlighten me, oh brilliant Squire.

SQUIRE REEVES

I didn't mean it like that. Look, if criticism seeks to rebuke the transgressive, the deviant, then what happens to it, criticism, when something or someone transgressive or a deviant embodies the form, manipulates the genre? My answer: the form isn't adequate. It can only be adequate through its malformation, through its deformation. The form must be twisted about in order to account for the "transgression" it sought to banish and rebuke. Otherwise, the essay only reproduces its conservatism, only reproduces itself. I hear you in my head, Doc. 'And what does that mean?' What that means is the genre of criticism via the form of the essay will have difficulty encountering

the ontological, philosophical, and epistemological questions of the Other, of black folks in particular. When those who are part of hegemonic notions of thought, those who participate in the Enlightenment project of universality encounter criticism performed by the Other, they will either hear screaming and shrieking, or they will hear nothing at all. And that hearing nothing at all comes in many forms, Doc. In comes in the form of colleagues declaring that you are asking the wrong questions, or that they don't understand or see the stakes in the argument, or that they don't quite believe you are using Marx, Derrida, Hegel, Kristeva, Lacan, Latour, or (insert whatever white scholar they feel particularly protective over in the blank) because that reading of them somehow critiques those famous scholars' ability to theorize the Other correctly. These types of mis-hearings, the meta-narratives of scholarship are the concerns of this project, Doc. I am concerned with what folks in the Academy mis-hear, have traditionally mis-heard, mis-read, and mis-interpreted because they expect to hear human subjectivity, rather than the subjectivity of objects. Doc, this project investigates the position of the black scholar and artist within the economies and discourses of the Academy—the economies of value, the economies of phonic and linguistic representation.

DR. BLEDSOE

Economies and discourse of the Academy?

SQUIRE REEVES

Yes, Doc, yes. If you would have let me continue, I would have connected Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man* to DuBois's John in "Of the Coming of John" in *Souls of Black Folks*, John being one of the literary ancestors to the narrator. In fact, John is forced to take a leave of absence because of his

continued tardiness and lack of commitment to his studies. And John's dismissal by his college anticipates the dismissal and journey of the unnamed narrator of *Invisible Man*. Unlike John, the narrator of *Invisible Man* does not return to his academic mecca, his historically black college of the South. In fact, the narrator of *Invisible Man* is driven farther and farther from his academic apotheosis such that he is quite literally driven underground. Being driven underground forces the narrator into a type of invisibility, forces him into state of abjection—a state that he willfully embraces because abjection as pedagogy possesses more political, ontological, and epistemological possibility than the previous pedagogies embodied in the historically, black college, the Brotherhood (i.e. Marxism), and Black Radicalism. I wanted to read both texts as allegories grappling with the precarious position of the black scholar in relationship to the discourses and economies of the Academy. How does a black scholar manipulate the tools of his academic trade, tools that were often meant to be clumsy in his or her hands, tools meant to isolate them from their kin and community? I wanted to use the allegory to discuss the central concern of this project: how does one extend democracy, discourse, location, ontology, philosophy, and theory to objects, what Bruno Latour calls the nonhuman, akin to what Charles Mills calls the subperson?[10] How does the

[10] I invoke both Bruno Latour's notion of the nonhuman and Charles Mills notion of the sub-person because this project interrogates the philosophical category of the human in and after the Enlightenment in respect to the black bodies. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour argues that the Enlightenment, in its quest for the modern, created an artificial divide between the human and the nonhuman. Furthermore, Latour posits that this divide is often compromised by humans, creating what he calls hybrids. However, these hybrids—the mixing of human and nonhuman—are ignored by moderns because of the desire for purity and tidy categories. This desire for purity ultimately leads to an othering that often allows humans to deny subjectivity to nonhumans. This denial of subjectivity leads to a characterizing the nonhuman as primitive, funky, and alien. In the nonhuman being characterized as such, the human does not grant agency, affect, or ontology to nonhuman. This denial creates a relationship between the human and nonhuman such that the nonhuman, because of its lack of subjectivity, becomes an empty vessel to be filled with the desires and whims of humans. I find Latour's discussion of the nonhuman pertinent and quite valuable in my argument that blackness and black bodies have always been objects, nonhumans. However, this project seeks to explore the subjectivity that they already possess but are not granted. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993).

black scholar embrace the abjection and position of commodity without apology, exploring the possibility, politics, power and philosophy of that position? "Of the Coming of John" exemplifies the struggle of black scholars to negotiate what Lindon Barrett in *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* calls "the street" and "the Academy," a dialectical relationship between two different and differently-valued discursive practices often seen at odds with each other in both academic and non-academic spaces.

DR. BLEDSOE

You're already doing the allegorical read that you say you want to do. But why not begin with DuBois? I like him, always have, except for those later years—the whole back to Africa thing.

SQUIRE REEVES

Of course, you didn't like him then.

DR. BLEDSOE

I am similarly engaged with Charles Mills discussion of the sub-personhood in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* because he argues that subpersonhood "captures the defining feature of the African-American experience under conditions of white supremacy (both slavery and its aftermath): that white racism so structured the world as to have negative ramifications for every sphere of black life—juridicial standing, moral status, personal / racial identity, epistemic reliability, existential plight, political inclusion, social metaphysics, sexual relations, aesthetic worth" (6). Mills goes on to write that "A subperson is not an inanimate object…Nor is it simply a nonhuman animal," but is an "entity," because of phenotype, "who" is not treated as fully a person (6). Even though my conversation of the black citizen-object owes much to Mills philosophical explorations of subpersonhood, I depart from Mills keeping his discussion on the continuum of human. "Subpersonhood" still prioritizes the human project, still keeps his project tethered to philosophers like Emanuel Kant and Edmund Burke who dismissed blackness and black folks as sublime, primitive, and lacking in intelligence. And in doing so, the scholarship, even as it seeks to challenge Kant and Burke's racist dismissals of blackness, re-inscribes the erasure and dismissing of the black body as dirty, recalcitrant, and strident. Embracing the abjection of being an "entity" and the nonhumanity of that subjectivity gives us and this project an opportunity to explore the ontology of race without having to constantly be in conversation with racism. See Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998), 6-10, 67-74. See also Emanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 111-13. See also Immanuel Kant, "On the Different Races of Man," in *Race and Enlightenment: A Reader*. Ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997, 38-48. See also George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 31. See also Emanuel Eze, "The Color of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology," in *Anthropology and the German Enlightenment: Perspectives on Humanity*. Ed. Katherine M. Faull (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1995), 196-237.

What did you say?

SQUIRE REEVES

That I would begin with DuBois's "Of the Coming of John."

DR. BLEDSOE

Well, let's start.

SQUIRE REEVES

(*In whooping style of black ministers of the South)*

At the very start, at the very start…

DR. BLEDSOE

Reeves, I'm waiting.

SQUIRE REEVES

(*Assumes a more academic posture in tone and decorum, walks over to the lectern with his lecture)*

In *The Souls of Black Folks,* W.E.B. DuBois investigates the problem of the twentieth century—race—in all its mayhem, contestation, and confliction. Most scholars, critics, and artists focus upon DuBois's statement about the two-ness, the double consciousness of the African-American. "One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a negro" begins the most infamous theorization of black ontology and identity in the United States of America. DuBois goes on to define double consciousness as "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (2). According to DuBois, double consciousness produces a phenomenon in which the negro feels as if he or she is always watching him or herself from the vantage point of another. This creates a self-

consciousness, a doubling that remains full of strife. Throughout *Souls of Black Folks*, DuBois explores the iterations of this confliction, this double-ness through various genres and forms—the academic essay, histories, autobiography, and even fiction. And it is the fictitious rendering of double consciousness that I find most pertinent to this project.

In "Of the Coming of John," DuBois builds an allegory about education, about the pedagogy and journey of a black scholar who leaves his community with the hopes of bringing back a golden fleece of knowledge to his southern hamlet, Altamaha, in southeastern Georgia. John grows up in convivial relationships with white folks as well as black. In fact, John has a white friend, a Judge's son named John. Their respective journeys mirror each other in that they both go away to college; and both are greeted with the harbinger of "when John comes," announcing their respective educational and economic contributions to their community. The story follows the black John's journey—his difficulty in school, his eventual semester dismissal, his redemption through taking his studies more seriously. In fact, DuBois describes John's transformation like a Romare Bearden painting come to life:

> Thus he grew in body and soul, and with him his clothes seemed to grown and arrange themselves; coat sleeves got longer, cuffs appeared, and collars got less soiled…and a new dignity crept into his walk. And we who saw daily a new thoughtfulness growing in his eyes began to expect something if this plodding boy. Thus he passed out of the preparatory school into college, and we who watched him felt four more years of change, which almost transformed the tall, grave man who bowed to us commencement morning. He had left his queer thought-world and come back to a world of motion and of men…He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, differences that erstwhile seemed natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed

> or been greeted with a laugh. He felt angry now when men did not call him "Mister," he clenched his hands at the "Jim Crow" cars, and chafed at the color-line that hemmed in him and his (144).

John's transformation into a black scholar is not only intellectual but physio-ontological. So phsycio-ontological, in fact, that his body, through the metonym of his wardrobe, transforms—"coat sleeves got longer, cuffs appeared, and collars got less soiled" (144). Also, he develops the melancholy of black intellectualism, a constant dissatisfaction with the exclusionary practices of civil society. The slights that he hadn't noticed before, he now notices. As the scales of so-called clichéd ignorance fall from John's eyes, he's finally able to view "the Veil," which is another metonymic signifier for double-consciousness. For DuBois, the Veil, what separates the African American from his fellow white American, is the translucent wall that helps to uphold what Toni Morrison calls the "racial disingenuousness" of the U.S.[11] John moves from the "queer thought-world," what DuBois's narrator might call the world of a Nietzschean slave mentality, a world in which he accepts his commodification without resistance or subversion, into the world of men, into the world of motion, of action, of transformation. I must say that I find it interesting that DuBois posits and positions queer thought as the antithesis and anarchic to action. If one reads against the story, reads with what bell hooks calls an oppositional gaze, might one come to the conclusion that this queer thought-world is a type of queer scholarship, a theorizing built not in the hallowed halls of academe but in the corporeality and genius of a black folk community? Might the action of this scholarship of this queer and anarchic theorizing produce a different motion—one misrecognized and unrecognizable to those steeped in Enlightenment notions of universal humanity, those

[11] See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1992), 6.

educated on great Western literature? It's as if queerness, a metonym for the non-normative ontology and epistemology of the folk, impedes a DuBoisian notion of progress and the spiritual strivings of the black community at large because of its alternative form, alternative notion of signature and citationality, alternative notion of mastery[12]. However, I must ask whose black community is this? Is John's transformation the Every Man transformation of the Black Community, or does John's transformation signal a black, bourgeoisie ideal of transformation transferred onto the folk and rural black communities as their ideal sense of transformation?

While these questions may seem to be a digression, they are not because, as DuBois's allegory continues to spin toward its sad end, John encounters the difficulty of translation, pedagogy, and the translation of pedagogy. After John graduates and receives his education, he heads back home, to Altamaha, to fulfill the prophecy of "When John comes." However, "when

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[12] My use of the term queer refers back to Cathy Cohen's discussion of the political possibilities of "queer" in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics." Cohen constructs a definition of queer that has the political possibility to include "those who stand on the outside of the dominated constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality" (441). This definition of queer de-centers the notion that queer only signified those who participate in same-sex relationships. Under Cohen's more inclusive definition of queer, those who resist state-sanctioned notions of heteronormativity are queer. Thus, a "straight" couple who seek to critique, reject, and disentangle themselves from enjoying the privileges of heteronormativity fall under Cohen's transformative definition of queer. Cohen's expansion of queer to resist "category-based identity politics of traditional lesbian and gay activism" disrupts the purity of the category-based identity and, concomitantly, expands who, what, where, and when something is queer. In the post-structuralist fashion, queer, then, becomes about a performance, a citation that constantly shifts and changes. Thinking of queer in this manner allows us to also see the queer in the alleged straight. Cohen's definition of queer allows for us to see the non-normative and that which resists normalization as part of a queer continuum; hence, my seizing of DuBois's narrator calling the folk of Altamaha queer. I create a queer citational string that connects the black "folk" of the late nineteenth century to contemporary notions of queer, thus offering a continuity of blackness and queerness that nuances both. See Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" (*GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian &Gay Studies* 3 (1997)), 437-444.
My use of the term queer also seeks to be in conversation with E. Patrick Johnson's theoretical transformation of queer to quare. Quare funks up queer. Quare vernacularizes queer, situates it at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. The funk of queer that I describe in this chapter is both queer and quare. See E. Patrick Johnson, ""Quare" studies, or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother" (*Text and Performing Quarterly* 21.1 (2010)), 1-25. See also Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003). I am also in conversation with José Muñoz discussion of the political possibility for queers of color via performance, a performance that often disidentifies with mainstream notions of queer culture. See also José Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1-36.

John comes home," it does not bring the sense of fruition, the sense of completion, the linguistic fitness that Altamaha or John hoped for. It is at his first speaking engagement at the black church in Altamaha, that John experiences the frustration of translation and translation of pedagogy. John, whose been trained at Wells Institute to consider the ethics of the Fall of Rome, tries to salve the wound of the 'Negro problem' with these notions of intellectualism and uplift born from these intellectual queries at Wells. John urges the congregation of how 'this new age demanded new ideas,' "broader ideas of human brotherhood and destiny" (DuBois 148). John tries to persuade the congregation that what will help solve the "Negro Problem" is popular education, "a new Industrial School that might rise among the pines," philanthropic work, and the need for unity among religions and denominations of religions. In fact, he openly critiques religious and denominational squabbling, chiding his audience that "the world cares little whether a man be Baptist or Methodist, or indeed a churchmen at all, so long as he is good and true. What difference does it make whether a man be baptized in river or washbowl, or not at all" (DuBois 148). In making this critique, John fails because he discounts the homegrown pedagogies and epistemologies of Altamaha, speaking in an "unknown tongue" of self-righteousness, a tongue met to remonstrate the strident sensibilities of the black folk in the congregation. His "sermon" languishes and dies mid-utterance, mid-speech. DubBois writes: "A painful hush seized that crowded mass. Little had they understood of what he said, for he spoke an unknown tongue, save the last word about baptism;…" (148). John's speech embodies the classic mistake of many black scholars—arrogantly returning home with an apotheosis of alienation in the form of educational high-mindedness. The pedagogy that John tries to enact in Altamaha is interested in wrangling the black community into the enterprise of universal humanity as though their subjectivity was somehow strident, disorderly, vacuous, as if there was not already a

pedagogy in place. John's doubly rebuked, his pedagogy for social uplift doubly rejected when the old, bent black man walks out of the Amen corner and walks into the pulpit and begins speaking. However his speech is not like John's. In fact, they are antithetical and anarchic to John, his ethos and logos. DuBois's description of the old black man's utterances harken back to the queer thought-world that John had disabused himself of through his education. The old man is described as "wrinkled and black,…his hands and voice shook with palsy; but on his face lay the intense rapt look of the religious fanatic." He picks up the Bible, raising it inarticulately and burst into words. It should be noted that DuBois does not offer his words to the reader like he did John's, instead he abstracts them by calling them "words, with rude and awful eloquence" (148). DuBois's narrator sublimates the old black man's work to the ether of the reader's imagination; the words dither about in an un-articulate space below the text. Therefore, the reader must try to make these phonic irruptions into articulate and understandable speech. Thus, this "rude and awful eloquence" is a sublime utterance, an utterance for which John has no understanding and neither does DuBois's narrator; however, the old man's utterance moves the people, causes them to 'moan and weep, wail and shout;' "a wild shrieking," writes DuBois, "arose from the corners where all the pent-up feelin of the hour gathered itself and rushed into the air" (148).

It is at this moment, this moment of wild shrieking, which I would call a folk theorizing, a queer theorizing of sorts, is where I would like to begin the discussion of the black citizen-object, scholarship, modernity, the surreal future, the sublime, and opacity. DuBois's "Of the Coming of John" perfectly animates the difficulty of modernity and its attendant intellectual apparatus to encounter, read, and interpret the black citizen-object exploring its epistemes and various aesthetics. "Of the Coming of John" allegorically, meta-critically, and meta-pedagogically

corroborates Houston Baker's critique of critics who unfairly meld the modernity of the Harlem Renaissance and its attendant modernisms with the modernity and modernisms of Joyce or Eliot. Baker offers: "I would suggest that judgments on Afro-American 'modernity' and the 'Harlem Renaissance' that begin with notions of British, Anglo-American, and Irish 'modernism' as 'successful objects, projects, and process to be emulated are misguided" (xv-xvi). Baker further offers that the "very *histories* that are assumed in the chronologies of British, Anglo-American, and Irish modernisms are radically opposed to any adequate and accurate account of the history of Afro-American modernism,…" (xvi). Though Baker's analysis is interested in the Harlem Renaissance and black modernism of the early twentieth century, the theoretical underpinning of his argument is valuable to this project. "Histories," what Baker emphasizes with italics, create the discourse, the grammars, technologies, and economies of representation, the epistemes, ontologies, and aesthetics. And these histories cannot be ignored or conflated. However, as Baker notes and as "Of Coming of John" elucidates, often these divergent and itinerant histories are disregarded and discarded for a quest for universality—the universality of humanity, the universality of language, meaning, and feeling. This must be stopped. And while Baker's intervention in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* is a good intervention, it needs to be extended. There needs to be a little more deformation of mastery, a little more deformation of scholarly conversation and a little less mastery of the form of conversation.

DR. BLEDSOE

Squire Reeves, get to it.

SQUIRE REEVES

I am Doc, I am.

(*Snaps back into Academic Performance)*

The deformation that I am arguing for in this chapter and in this project in general is the deformation of the quest for universal humanity for the black citizen-object; some might argue that this is not new; isn't this what black studies departments, the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement have petitioned for? And I would say, no. And yes. All of these movements were interested in a black humanity, one that was allowed to articulate and possess its particularity, its own standards, traditions, and notions of beauty that were not merely black-washed versions of the ruins and monuments of Anglo-European and Anglo-American cultures, histories, and aesthetics[13]. But they were still arguing for the status of human, bartering and trading in the discourses of modernity and universal humanity which uphold notions of purity through the human/nonhuman divide. And this quest for humanity, particular or universal, is a Sisyphusian endeavor because these discourses of the human, of modernity continue to lack the democracy and non-normativity necessary to properly account for the subjectivity of the black object. Quite simply, I am arguing for the complete eradication and dismantling of the notion that black "people" are humans at all. I am not interested in the biological narrative and fiction of the human; instead, I am interested in disrupting the narrative of human that biological fictions cannot attend to—that of the philosophical, the realm of the vulgar, the popular—the complexity of the banal. I argue that we, black "folks," have always been objects: in the language of Karl Marx—the subjunctively imagined speaking commodity, in the language of Bruno Latour—the nonhuman, in the language of Eduoard

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[13] Here, I am riffing on and in conversation with Amiri Baraka's declaration in "The Myth of Negro Literature" that black, American poets "would be better" if they "listened to Bessie Smith sing *Gimme A Pigfoot*, or listened to the tragic verse of a Billie Holiday, than to be content to imperfectly imitate the ruined minds of Europe." See Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1998), 113.

Glissant—the opaque Citizen[14]. I am at once embracing the abjection of the black body and reaching toward describing and theorizing a notion of black subjectivity that is unapologetic in its enactment of that abjection, unapologetic in the playing with the dark, playing with the cultural, psychic, and spiritual deracination of black bodies throughout history. My notion of the black citizen-object is not merely a recapitulation, a re-trafficking in discourses that glorified black subjugation. When I write or petition for the black citizen-object, I am not using the term as slave master might; I am not seeking to hail black bodies, black aesthetic and intellectual productions into the marketplace of capitalism, the willful objectification of the human. The black citizen-object is also not a pejorative term meant to discuss the ways in which black people are othered, hailed as human objects or oppressed. The black citizen-object is the hybrid of the black body and the history of black abjection. This project thinks through the ways in which moans, shrieks, songs, novels, narrators, preachers, and poems emanating from black citizen-objects resist, obscure, opaquely participate and contradict notions of the human, notions of market, value, and economy. This project argues that black bodies and their attendant artistic productions articulate an ontology and philosophy that seek opacity and irreducibility. This irreducibility creates a rhizome, a poetics, ontology, and philosophy of relationality that resist categorization and transparency. And because of this liminal positionality, black folks and their artistic productions stultify the modern mind and its attendant narratives of intellect, beauty, and sound because of their divergent histories and divergent notions of intelligence and intelligibility. These divergent notions of intelligence and intelligibilities are not accidental; they are inhabitations of resistive and transgressive ontology that

[14] This call to raze the stable notion of the human, particularly the black human, is an extension of Slyvia Wynter's argument that the blackness must be read differently in the humanist model. See Slyvia Winter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism" (*boundary 2* (12.3-13.1): 1984), 19-70.

seek to enact a future that disrupts the present and the ever-presence of black subjugation. As Fred Moten states in *In the Break*, "the history of blackness is testament to the fact that *objects* [emphasis mine] can and do resist." And it is with Moten and this very quote that I will begin the investigation of the black citizen-object.

In *In the Break*, Fred Moten begins his query into the aesthetics of the black, radical tradition and "the convergence of blackness and the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance at the scene of subjection" with this statement: "The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness—the extended moment of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity" (1).

(*Squire Reeves catches the Holy Ghost)*

Amen, amen, amen, brother Moten.

DR. BLEDSOE

Oh, child, back up, sit down, and let's not forget the good manners that one has learned while attending these good, white folks school, and finish thy long quoting. Right now. Though spirit moved you to respond to Moten's call, the rules of long quoting persist and one must show oneself to possess all the manners of the genteel if ever one wanted to be taken serious by polite society, by the real arbiters of taste.

SQUIRE REEVES

Oh, Doc, so right, so right. Please forgive me.

(*Snaps back into Academic-ese)*

Moten continues:

> While subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses. I'm interested in what happens when we consider the phonic materiality of such propriative exertion (1).

I would like to play along with Moten, play this tune he carefully signifies with chord progressions and arrangements; however I will need to diverge at some point and make it my own tune, play the changes forward but never straight. Why must I play along with Moten rather than immediately launching into my own solo, my own song? I must play along with him because we are beginning in the same territory and taking similar adventures, to borrow Ornette Coleman's vernacular concerning his improvisational method in jazz. We both are interested in the Citizen-object and their aesthetic productions. However, Moten's adventure requires him to follow the avant-garde. I'm interested in troubling the very ontology of avant-gardism, particularly black avant-gardism. My journey requires me to follow the avant-garde in the traditional, in the poetry of those who traffic in received forms.

Doc Bledsoe, is it alright that I opened with this statement, with this allusion to jazz and co-performativity rather than immediately launching into elucidating the long quote as is considered par and mannerly for this course? Doc, Doc, you there?

DR. BLEDSOE

Yes, Squire Reeves, I'm here. And though it's a bit showy in a black sort of way, it is not too ostentatious. Convene. Convene. And remember, I will announce myself only when necessary,

only when you might be edging toward the impropriety as you are want to do. So carry on as if I am but a whisper in the back of your ear, the last of the night purring at the neck of dawn.

SQUIRE REEVES

Alright, if you say so, Doc.

DR. BLEDSOE

But don't forget, manners first.

SQUIRE REEVES

(*Speaks directly to the audience)*

Please forgive me. I…I forget myself often.

(*Turns, smiles, and bows to Dr. Bledsoe as if to ask for forgiveness. After Dr. Bledsoe waves his hand for Squire Reeves to continue, Squire Reeves makes his way back to the lectern, composing himself, ready to begin again.O*

Moten's first proclamation, that blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist, requires a book unto itself. In fact, the footnote that follows the statement is testament to the depth and range of the intellectual and philosophical territory it covers. Moten adeptly and adroitly does not address the black experience in America—slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, Post Civil Rights—as a human experience. He posits the experience of black Americans in America as an experience of objects, a history of things and thingy-ness. Doc, how am I doing? Okay, I don't hear you, but I'll keep going. The history of blackness is one that testifies to the fact that black objects possess agency, ideology, and even an aesthetic that can counter, challenge, and subvert their making, their commissioning by another. Moten, however, quickly follows this statement with a quick caveat, an anarrangement of the previous statement, not wanting his reader, his interlocutors to be confused; personhood and subjectivity are not the same.

In Moten's language, they are not equivalent. Amen, amen, amen. In order to understand this statement, I would like to add two new voices, two citizen-scholars to the mix (I mean the conversation)—Bruno Latour and Charles Mills. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour suggests that because of modernity, we do not extend democracy—democracy of language, democracy of situation or location, democracy of subjectivity—to objects, what he calls the non-human. Latour seeks to collapse this neat bifurcation, this fiction that modern citizens and citizen thinkers have erected because this border between the human and nonhuman never really existed. And though moderns pay lip-service to the bifurcation, they constantly disrupt, disagree, and traffic in hybrids (integration of the nonhuman and human). Quite simply, moderns continually contradict and erase the line between human and nonhuman daily. Thus when Moten declares that black history is testament to the resistance and agency of objects, he extends democracy, subjectivity to the nonhuman, to the object. He's not declaring the subjectivity *human* either; hence, his rejection of personhood or even a sub-personhood, which is the term Charles Mills coins as a way of thinking through the philosophical implications of the liminal black citizen—human but not fully a person because of contradictions and tensions heaped upon the black experience in a white-supremacist society. Moten does not want the reader to conflate subjectivity with the legal status of person and the attendant baggage that signifies humanity or "humanoid," again borrowing another Mills coined term. Moten's language, the purposeful choice of the word object and its invocation and reiteration in these opening sentences rebukes the epistemological and disciplinary assumption that obfuscates and would circumscribe the history of the black object. The un-owning of black slaves (as Patricia Williams terms the end of slavery), the Civil Rights Movement striking down American apartheid—these historical events do not make a black object human.

In fact, it further solidifies the black citizen-object's status as object because black objects have to be made human through these various recovery projects; black objects must be grafted onto the human project. And while many scholars' projects are consumed with rehabilitating the image of the negro (à la Frederick Douglass, DuBois, and Baraka), Moten's project as well as mine is to extend democracy to the object, to extend or, better yet, acknowledge a citizenship that is always-already there[15]. The project of extending democracy to the object, to the nonhuman contradicts and yet furthers the project of the slave narratives by Harriet Jacobs, Olaudah Equiano, and Frederick Douglass, narratives that sought to expose liberal, well-meaning whites to the humanity of black folks[16]. In many ways, that project of rehabilitation, a very necessary project indeed, is the Harlem Renaissance project, the Black Nationalist project, the Black Studies Department project, even the Dark Room Collective and Cave Canem project. I am appreciative of that project. And I thank those elders, scholars, activists, poets, artists, and everyday folk that contributed to that project. However, that project unnecessarily jettisons the illustrious and extraordinary power in what might be considered the abject, the subjectivity, poetics, ontology, and the philosophy of the black object, the black nonhuman[17]. In this project, I want to reject the academic, disciplinary, and epistemological assumption of redeeming the human, the black human. And neither am I interested

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[15] See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Yale UP, 2003). See W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publication, Inc., 1994). See Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1998).

[16] See Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. L. Maria Child and Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2009). See Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Caretta (New York: Penguin Books, 2003). See Douglass.

[17] In *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*, Scott examines the black historical past that gets charged by Black Arts /Power Movement participants and scholars and philosophers like Frantz Fanon as abject, something that only retains the retinue of defeat. Scott argues that this abjection is the space for political, intellectual, and aesthetic possibility. The abjection of slavery, rape, and black oppression is the fertile ground of a potentially liberatory ethos and epistemology. See Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: NYUP, 2010).

in rehabilitating the black object. It needs no redemption. However, I am interested in discussing and investigating the black object on its own terms. But this investigation will not be a waving of the wand and tapping on of the magic hat in order to—tadah!—turn the black object into a black human. This is no Pinocchio project. The wooden dolls are wooden dolls but they have a subjectivity. But not a personhood.

Enough of the declarations for now: onto more territory and adventure[18]. However, before the departing is performed, I must cover a little more ground of where Moten and I agree. Moten's interest in the shriek, Aunt Hester's 'heart-rending shrieks' in Douglass's slave narrative and the continuance of such shriek-as-speech-as-song in the vocals of jazz artist Abbey Lincoln, the illegibility of black resistance as expressed in Adrian Piper's theatricality, the poetics of Amiri Baraka, the 'disruption of the Enlightenment linguistic project' and 'the search for universal language,' what he calls the sentimental avant-garde as expressed in the work of Duke Ellington, all of these interests are also my interest. I am also interested in his notion of the break, the cut, black performance's lyricism of surplus—"invagination, rupture, collision, and augmentation." Lastly, I would like to also take on this journey the way in which black sound, black aesthetic productions produce stutters in the grammars and technologies of language, philosophy, and the very ontology of sound. Blackness, black objects, black aesthetics produce a whole series of mis-es—mis-readings, mis-hearings, mis-interpretations—whole territories of opacities and undecipherability. However, why must they be located only in the avant-garde? Moten does not turn to the black

[18] "Territory" and "adventure" are the terms Ornette Coleman used to describe the lyric arc of free jazz. The "territory" is written chord changes and melody. Coleman instructed his band that after they played the original score once—the territory—they should depart from the score, the chord changes, the melody line, even the rhythmic structure. He called this departure the adventure. I use Coleman's notion of citationality and improvisation because of the way it embodies the way in which I plan to riff, revise, and cite Moten.

aesthetic tradition in general (which I am arguing that he should). Instead, he locates these anarrangments, irruptions, invaginations, subversive citationality in the work of the avant-garde. But what about the black traditional, the alleged formal, the work that might look like something we've already seen before, the work that might even bear the mythologies of language and form built and lauded in white literary traditions? Why must the black radicalness be necessarily conflated with the avant-garde? (If Moten and black scholars are not careful, we will make the same mistake many critics of Louis Armstrong in the late 1950's made concerning his commitment to black, political enfranchisement and black, radical politics.) Couldn't the avant-garde produce a poly-vocal, anarrangment of sound that reifies ideologies of oppression and hegemony? Can't the formal shriek produce mis-hearings, mis-readings, and misinterpretations? Isn't the black body, blackness in and of itself, stultifying, sublime, always-already transgressive in an Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment-centric modernity? If the black body is always-already sublime, transgressive, aberrant, and disorderly, then it would follow that any aesthetic and intellectual productions emanating from these funky bodies embody a break, a cut, an anarrangement and interruption of the grammars and technologies of knowing.

This notion of the black body as sublime, stultifying, terroristic, and transgressive to the Enlightenment rationality and its subsequent linguistic project can be best glimpsed in Edmund Burke's *A Philosphical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (*Enquiry).* In *Enquiry*, Burke defines the sublime as "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotions which the mind is capable of feeling" (36). For Burke, pain, a chief

characteristic of knowing or recognizing the sublime, is stronger than pleasure and therefore the sublime is a more powerful emotion. The pain of the sublime ultimately brings with it the fear of death. This death normally materializes in the arresting of the imagination or the paralysis of agency and action. The sublime overwhelms the spectator with the specter, trace, or haunting of death. After defining the sublime, Burke identifies objects, affective situations, moods, sounds, and colors that stir the sublime within the modern citizen. For instance, the bull or wild animal provokes the feelings of sublimity while the cow or the tamed animal does not. Vacuity, power (of the state), solitude, silence, and darkness all produce feelings of the sublime mostly because of the way in which they isolate the spectator through the disruption of borders, interrupting the spectators ability to separate him or herself from the great dark, the ether. It's as if the spectator has matured backward and has been re-rendered in the Lacanian mirror stage, unable to parse and individuate their body and thus their faculties (mental and physical) from the Great Out There, the Other[19]. However, what makes it terrible and terrifying is that one cannot lose the knowledge of one's separateness once it has been attained. Thus, this retreating backwards commissioned and enacted by an outside entity such as darkness, vacuity, power, solitude, and silence provokes in the spectator a return to the origins, to the Ur-space of death: birth, which most have no memory of. The spectator is obliterated, wiped out. They, the spectators, no longer control the gaze, the frame which is a symbolic enactment of death. Burke, however, does not perform this type of analysis; instead, he just attributes the feelings of pain to these entities and objects being terrible in their very nature.

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[19] See Jacques Lacan "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of I as Revealed in the Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000), 178-183.

DR. BLEDSOE

Squire Reeves, get to it. Don't forget that you must relate it all back to your central thesis, your central point of elucidating how the black body is historical and historico-philosophically understood as transgressive and sublime.

SQUIRE REEVES

Right, Doc, right. But I have to fully unpack and define the sublime.

DR. BLEDSOE

Yes, but you need to announce that to your reader, Squire. Give them some signposts.

SQUIRE REEVES

Doc, folks say not to trust you—that you would sell a brother out, but you sure are helping me out.

DR. BLEDSOE

What did the old folks say, Squire? Believe half of what you see, and none of what you hear. Now, enough of this; get back in there and make the race proud, my boy.

SQUIRE REEVES

(*Begins right where he left off)*

This going backwards, this forced return to the darkness, to pre-being produces a sense of terror because it returns the spectator back to the break, the cut, back to an anarrangement of rationality. Thus, the black body, its color, its skin produces this terror. For example, Burke declares that he knows that blackness is a more "confined idea" of the sublime because of what occurred to a boy who glimpsed black objects after having a cataract removed. I produce the bulk

of the story and Burke's anaylsis here because of its pertinence to establishing the black body and anything that black body produces is always already transgressive, sublime, and stultifying. In "DARKNESS terrible in its own nature," Burke writes:

> Perhaps it may appear on enquiry, [sic] that blackness and darkness are in some degree painful by their natural operation, independent of any associations, whatsoever. I must observe, that the ideas of darkness and blackness are much the same; and they differ only in this, that blackness is a more confined idea. Mr. Cheselden has given us a very curious story of a boy, who had been born blind, and continued so until he was thirteen or fourteen years old; he was then couched for a cataract, by which operation he received his sight. Among many remarkable particulars that attended his first perceptions, and judgments on visual objects, Cheselden tells us, that the first time the boy saw a black object, it gave him great uneasiness; and that some time after, upon accidentally seeing a negro woman, he was struck with great horror at the sight. The horror, in this case, can scarcely be supposed to arise from any association. The boy appears by the account to have been particularly observing, and sensible for one of his age: and therefore it is probable, if the great uneasiness he felt at the first sight black had arisen from its connexion with any other disagreeable ideas, he would have observed and mentioned it. For an idea, disagreeable only by association, has the cause of its ill effect on the passions evident enough at the first impression; in ordinary cases, it is indeed frequently lost; but this is, because the original association was made very early, and the consequent impression repeated often. In our instance, there was no time for such an habit; and there is no reason to think, that the ill effects of black on his imagination were more owing to its connexion with any disagreeable ideas, than the good effects of more cheerful colours were derived from their connexion with pleasing ones. They had both probably their effects from their natural operation (131-2).

Before I begin unpacking this long quotation that begins with "darkness" in all caps like some boogie-man of a word, I must acknowledge the potential falsities inherent in the retelling of Burke's Dr. Cheselden story. For instance, it must be acknowledge that the boy might not have

been completely blind. He might have had the ability to see slightly and never told anyone. I must also acknowledge the way in which narrating and narratives automatically produce lies even as they create truths because of the use of artifice and storytelling techniques, the imposition of time and linearity on the making sense of experience that is often nonlinear. Quite simply, I must acknowledge that this evidence is anecdotal and thus fashioned, contrived, and, to some degree, made up. Despite these potential falsities or untruths and even if Burke completely fabricates the entire situation of the boy glimpsing the black woman for the first time, this narrative concretizes the notion that blackness, particularly the black body is received as transgressive, sublime, and terrifying. The narrative enacts, and performatively so, the notion of the black body as sublime. Its locution, to use the J.L. Austin's paradigm of the performative utterance, creates an illocution that has a perlocutionary effect—that of rendering the black body, the black female body in particular, sublime. Much in the way that a ship is christened or a marriage made felicitious by an officiant, Burke's hailing the black female body as sublime in this text creates a black sublimity with regard to Burke's text and the greater Enlightenment linguistic project.

As I note earlier, Burke begins with "darkness" in all caps. While this capitalization technique is a typographic, literary, and linguistic custom at the time—the capitalization of abstract nouns, it does not warrant a complete dismissal just because it is custom. This custom of highlighting the abstraction makes it hypervisible. This hypervisibility re-inscribes the significance of the word and, moreover, re-inscribes its abstraction. It moves from being merely a word to an icon. In it becoming iconic, it moves beyond the rational into the realm of the sublime; quite simply, the word gains more symbolic capital through its defamiliarization. And that defamiliarizing of the familiar causes the word to become something greater than human. The word morphs into a

concept. Thus, the text, as a type of body, a black printed body (which it literal is) becomes hypervisible and metonymically proceeds the black body that will appear underneath it in body paragraphs. In other words, "DARKNESS" is a stand-in, a substitution, a harbinger of the black woman's body that will appear in Burke's anaylsis. "DARKNESS," metonymically, announces the perceived sublimity of the woman's black body in the text and participates the invisibility/hypervisibility dichotomy that is the scene of subjection. The reproduction of the boy's fear and Dr. Cheselden's story in not only Burke's text but in this text as well invisibilizes and then hypervisibly reproduces the horror. Thus this citation string, like the word "darkness" in the section header, further invigorates the perceived sublimity of what follows, the sublimity of darkness and blackness. I used the term perceived sublimity because I do not wish to conflate Burke's analysis with my own. I would like to make it clear that what I am tracing is the way in which blackness and the black body is stultifying to a Eurocentric mind ensconced in Enlightenment rationality. While it may seem that I am regressing or transgressing against the "continuum" paradigm that is so popular in academic discourse right now, I am not. I am not creating a binary as a way of creating an 'us and them,' a margin and center, an oppressor/oppressed binary. What I am seeking to do is merely elucidate the way in which the black body has always been stultifying to rationality, the Enlightenment project, and The Academy.

If one doesn't believe that blackness is always stultifying to whiteness, let's go back to Burke. As Burke notes, blackness is terrifying its very nature, in its very essence. Burke calls it terrible in its "natural operation, independent of any associations whatsoever." His choice of the term operation points to blackness's systemic and procedural terror. And this procedural terror manifests itself without a sense of order, any "associations." Thus blackness as sublime is like that of

the bull, the untamed animal; its logic is inextricably tied its flesh, to its fabric, to its ontology. Blackness's terror is procedural in that it only belongs to it and corresponds to nothing else. After Burke makes this assertion, he proceeds to substantiate his claim with Mr. Cheselden's narrative. Mr. Cheselden's narrative concerns a boy who has been blind most of his life and upon having a cataract 'couched' is terrified by not only back objects and black women. To represent the boy's fear more accurately: the boy is made to feel "great uneasiness" when he encounters a black object; however, when he "accidently" encounters "negro woman," 'he is struck with great horror at the sight.' Let us spend some time with this moment, this little snatch of narrative. Black objects produce great uneasiness, what I might call mild perturbation. However, Burke's use of "however" and semicolon, both coordinating gestures in grammar, both signaling a coordination of two independent clauses create a dialectic between the black object and negro woman. In fact, the "however" modifies what came before, discounting what came before, much like a but, through the use of scale. Quite simply, the black object causes a bit of pain while the black woman causes horror, a true arresting of the boy's faculties. Burke's use the adverb "accidently" also should be made note of. "Accidently" signifies harm but an unintentional harm. In other words, the boy should have been protected or protected himself or known to protect himself from the spectacle which was this black women's body. The use of the term "accidently" also points the impending death in the viewing. This accident could only produce harm to the speaker. This moment in the narrative also points to the etiquette of spectating and the etiquette of making a spectacle. Because the boy had never learned to be a spectator, and if we use Burke's definition of spectator—the definer of beauty, then this boy has never learned to make beauty, to bring things into order. Thus for Burke, the boy succumbs to the horror because he's not learned to control his gaze. The horror

that the boy feels at the sight of the black woman also beckons back to the cut, the break, the forced return to darkness. It is not a coincidence that the subject of the story, a once blind boy, was blind. Up until his cataract was couched, he existed suspended in what Lacan would call the mirror stage. (And as a side note, I don't feel it anachronistic to use Lacan in this manner because of the long history of rational discourse in psychology and the fact that psychology is a discipline descended from Enlightenment thinkers such as Burke and Kant. And this narrative in particular anticipates discussions the mirror stage and Lacanian notions of symbolic order.) Once the cataract was removed he began his quest for the Symbolic Order, for language; in other words, he understood himself to be separate from the darkness. The surgery creates the trauma of "being ripped out of the imaginary fullness of being separated from the object—the Mother—that provided us with it" (Rivkin and Ryan 124). Now, with sight, he moves toward the social, the Symbolic Order—language and culture. However, viewing the negro woman's body immediately thrusts the boy back into the trauma of the break; 'accidently' encountering the negro woman reminds him of his initial lack, his blindness that once overwhelmed him. The black woman's body drags him backward and does not allow him to advance in the Symbolic Order, in the world of the social and civil. His social fitness, which was questionable and lacking prior to the surgery due to his blindness, is now again thrown into question. And the boy's fitness, which is metaphor for the diseased body made whole, the civil body brought into order, is the very concern of Burke's philosophical inquiry.

While Burke's philosophical treatise might seem to be concerned with the origins of the beautiful and sublime and their subsequent horrors and pleasures, that reading would only be a superficial reading of the text. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Ideas of the Beautiful and Sublime* can also be read as a treatise on order and disorder, fitness and disease, and, moreover, a

treatise on colonialism and the colonized subject (object) as it interacts with the civil body and homeland.

COUSIN LEROI

(*Steps out from the band)*

Go on, Cousin.

SQUIRE REEVES

Dr. Bledsoe, is that you?

COUSIN LEROI

No, Cousin, it's your Cousin Leroi.

SQUIRE REEVES

Cousin Leroi, I didn't know you were here.

COUSIN LEROI

Oh Child, you know I am. Been listening along to what you been playing. A bunch of us came down from Black Creek and Cheraw to hear you.

SQUIRE REEVES

What'd y'all think so far?

COUSIN LEROI

You jammin' Cousin, you jammin. I might get the Cliff Notes version of this later.

SQUIRE REEVES

Cousin Leroi, you a mess.

COUSIN LEROI

Sho' is. Keep going, youngster, tell me more about Burke and that blind boy.

SQUIRE REEVES

Ok.

DR. BLEDSOE

(*Indignant*)

Yes, Squire, tell us more about Burke.

SQUIRE REEVES

Alright, Doc, my bad.

(*Back at the lectern)*

The once blind boy's reaction to the black woman's body can be read as metaphor for the colonizer's reaction to coming upon a native subject in the new colony for the first time. In countless books that chronicle the exploration of the African continent, the witness always attest to the horror at the visage, the culture, the tastes of the natives in terms of aesthetics, manners, and dress. Peter Kolb's *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope: or, A Particular account of several nations of the Hottentots: their religion, laws, customs, ceremonies, and opinions; their art of war, professions, language, and genius, &c. Together with a short account of Dutch settlement at the Cape*, Francis Moore's *Travels into the inland parts of Africa : containing a description of the several nations for the space of six hundred miles up the river Gambia … to which is added Capt. Stibbs's voyage up the Gambia in the year 1723*, and Jean Barbot's *A description of the coasts of north and south-Guinea, and of Ethiopia inferior, vulgarly Angola being a new and accurate account of the western maritime countries of Africa* are examples of travel

narratives that recount exploits of explorers and colonists into the "inland parts of Africa" where one might encounter "Ethiopia inferior" and 'vulgar Angolans.' Burke's book is in a similar tradition. *Enquiry* is more than just a pedagogical tool for understanding ideas of beauty. Its reach is beyond the realm of the aesthetic. The pedagogy in this book instructs the reader on the proprieties of interacting with the colonized body and how to bring the potential disorder of that body back into order. Remember, the first tool of colonization, the first order of business is to deem what is beautiful and what is not, what is valuable and what is not. And in the process of making these judgments, the colonizer, those that mete out this process, control all means of exchange. These are not just the bases of the financial economy; it is the bases of Economies. *Enquiry* acts as a manual on how to enter into the Symbolic Order (of the colony, the civil world, of language) and become master; it is a guidebook on how to enter into the purity of humanity and modernity while disavowing and castigating the disease of the primitive (the citizen-object). Burke's bifurcation—the sublime and beautiful—helps to reinstitute the human/nonhuman divide and subordinate the nonhuman to the realm of the unfit, one always-already lacking. And Burke, through his analysis, helps to bring this lack back into subjection, and by metonymic substitution, he helps the reader to bring the negro woman back into order. Burke places the reader in two positions in the course of this passage: in the position of the boy and in his position, that of wise counsel. It is no coincidence that the boy is called sensible. As Burke notes the boy was a "sensible one for his age." Burke does not wish to alienate the reader who necessarily occupies the position of the once blind boy. The reader, like the boy, comes to Burke's treatise blind, but through the couching of cataracts, the reading of the text, can begin to understand how to bring the sublime, darkness, blackness, and the colonized body into subjection. He wants his reader to feel sensible even as the reader is affected by

the glimpse of the black woman, the disease and horror of her alleged sublimity. However, through another metonymic substitution, the reader can become an arbiter of beauty, like Burke himself, and an arbiter of the Symbolic Order through his text. The reader is guided through the text, through the parable, and once the reader is on the other side of the reading, on the other side of his or her fear through fully understanding the natural operations of the sublime, then the reader becomes as Burke, as one who understands the very nature of the sublime and the beautiful, the very nature of the fitness and disease. From this vantage point, the reader will be able to parse the sublimity of the darkness from the sublimity of blackness as Burke had done earlier. The reader will be able to make deductions and pronouncements like Burke:

> …and there is no reason to think, that the ill effects of black on his imagination were more owing to its connexion with any disagreeable ideas, than that the good effects of more cheerful colours were derived from their connexion with pleasing ones. They had both probably their effects from their natural operation (Burke 131-32).

The reader then comes to the place of understanding that blackness by its very procedure, in its "natural operation" is horrible, terrifying, and sublime; and with this understanding comes the ability to bring blackness into subjection. Subsequently, the reader learns how to mediate the relationship between the colony/the colonized body and the civil body/the homeland. And concomitantly, they become a good citizen of the polis, of civil society. This mediation between the colony/colonized body and the civil body/homeland requires the understanding that the erratic and terrifying nature of blackness is irrational and without order in its very ontology; and they should no longer fear it. Blackness cannot be reasoned or reasoned with. From now on, the reader will not fear the black object, nor will the reader try to understand its terror and become overwhelmed by

it. They will no longer be as the boy who glimpses the negro woman any longer. Instead blackness will be understood as always-already illegible. Blackness, black bodies in particular, is sublime in its very nature, and like nature it must be understood, manipulated, and treated as an Other. Again, I must state that I am performing a close-reading of Burke using the theoretical apparatus of Lacan and Moten. I am not purporting that either blackness or the black body is actually sublime. What I do seek to trace in this moment are the many implications that Burke's text offers in understanding the Enlightenment project, the project of modernity in relationship to the black body, discourses around the black body, and the perceptive tools used to read or interrogate aesthetic and intellectual productions committed by black bodies. And Burke's anaylsis can also be extended to the white body and its fiction of humanity. For instance, the once blind boy's anxiety can also be read as the unmaking of his body, the unmaking of his humanity. When he encounters the alleged horribleness of the black women's body, his body, which is similar to the black woman's except for skin color, is thrown into question. Maybe, he, too, is not human. Maybe, he, too, is closer to the Other than he thinks. Eeeek! In the language of Latour, he is made a hybrid. He, the blind boy, is made an object, transformed by a magic, an alien intelligence, he did not agree to. What are the implications of this process, of this fashioning? For instance, what does it mean that blackness, the black body is sublime in its very nature? If the sublime produces terror, then what is the terror that the black body produces? And if the sublime overwhelms and black is sublime, then wouldn't it follow that anything blackness or the black body creates, touches, and encounters produces terror within the framework of Enlightenment thinking? And if not terror, illegibility? And wouldn't these illegibilities lead to a whole series of mis-es—mis-readings, mis-hearings, misinterpretations, mis-Phillis Wheatley?

BLACK OUT

Chapter 2: On the Shrieking of Phillis Wheatley (Coda)

AT RISE

The same set design from the last scene. However, Dr. Bledsoe begins this scene from the audience. He's already walking towards the stage when he begins his dialogue.

DR. BLEDSOE

You can't end a chapter like that.

SQUIRE REEVES

Why not? I just did.

DR. BLEDSOE

Yes…well…you shouldn't end a chapter with a series of unanswered questions. It's rhetorically unethical.

SQUIRE REEVES

It's only "rhetorically unethical" if I don't answer the questions at all. Chapter 2 is a continuation, a response to the call of Chapter 1. More adventure, Doc. More adventure.

DR. BLEDSOE

Very well. All of that signifyin(g) on jazz and black vernacular traditions is cute, but more substance.

SQUIRE REEVES

You mean whiteness.

DR. BLEDSOE

Squire.

SQUIRE REEVES

Doc, look, black vernacular traditions of theorizing, reading, and thinking are as rigorous as the Academy's. There is as much substance in Aunt Hester's shriek, Louis Armstrong's soloing horn, and Phillis Wheatley's poems as there are in any text by Hegel or Kant.

And it is Miss Phillis Wheatley that we must get back to because of her gendered body, her poetry, and the subsequent literary criticism around; her work invokes and exemplifies the unfathomable for the Enlightenment-centric mind—the intellectual aesthete in the form of a black woman, a black slave woman to be precise. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson makes his famous declaration concerning Phillis Wheatley: "Religion has indeed produced a Phyllis [sic] Whately [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism" ("Query XIV: Laws").

COUSIN LEROI

Yet he's talking about her. Ain't that about the dumbest shit?

SQUIRE REEVES

I feel you, Cousin Leroi, but I got this.

DR. BLEDSOE

Yes, let him get it, Mr. Leroi. By the way Mr. Leroi, I never got your last name.

COUSIN LEROI

Didn't give it.

SQUIRE REEVES

Doc, Cousin Leroi, can I get back to explaining to the folks how I am going to investigate this derisive criticism of Wheatley differently than other scholars?

COUSIN LEROI

Go on, Young Buck.

DR. BLEDSOE

Proceed, Squire Reeves.

SQUIRE REEVES

As I mentioned to Cousin Leroi, some scholars and critics like Henry Louis Gates, Vincent Caretta, and Honorée Fanon Jeffers use this Jefferson quote as a means of decrying Jefferson's denial of Wheatley's full humanity[20]. But focusing on merely how Jefferson cannot glimpse Wheatley's full humanity flattens the exploration of his criticism. If the quote becomes merely about the inadequacy of Jefferson's sight, then we lose an opportunity to investigate idiosyncrasies and complexities of such a jejune criticism by Jefferson, particularly in relationship to the previous example of the boy who's couched for a cataract and Fred Moten's reading of Marx's inability to imagine the commodity speaking. What is the nature of the obscuring for Jefferson? How does Wheatley's body participate in the obscuring? And how does Wheatley's body captured in a market economy further obscure the seeing, the reading? And lastly, how does subsequent criticism of Wheatley, the attestation from the eighteen gentlemen of Boston, alleged proponents of Wheatley's poems, proliferate and propagate similar readings to Jefferson's? And what are the implications of the letter of attestation as the first piece of African-American literary criticism?

[20] See Honorée Fanon Jeffers blog: http://phillisremastered.wordpress.com/. See also Jeffers, "The Subjective Briar Patch: Contemporary American Poetry" (*Virginia Quarterly Review* 88.2 (2012)), 97-106.

Also, how does examining Wheatley's poems and the reaction to Wheatley's poems through the lens of a black citizen-object complicate the reading and exploration of the black citizen-object in proximity to The Academy's need for transparency? Again, in order to begin to answer these questions above, we must turn to Moten and his Marx.

In "Resistance to the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," Moten predicts that knowing the future in the present is the vocation of the speaking commodity—what he asserts that Marx could only "subjunctively imagine" (Moten 8). Moten, then, reproduces the section of *Capital* entitled "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret." In this section Marx fills the empty body of the commodity, which can also be understood as the citizen-object, with speech. However, he does so, as Moten makes the reader aware, subjunctively—with a very big "if" (8). Then, within the same passage that Marx endows the commodity with a bit of subjectivity, he considers how economists might speak of the object quickly critiquing both moments of imagined speech as ridiculous and impossible. As Moten correctly points out, Marx is not too concerned with what the commodity, the object, says but more so that the commodity speaks at all, the impossibility of it. But Moten correctly points out that just as Marx denies that the commodity speaks and relates to itself through enter into a system of exchange, he also affirms this potential future and the notion that the commodity does in fact speak. In fact, the commodity not only speaks but it also has agency prior to entering into a system of exchange. Marx participates in a hybridization that he would like to cast off as impossible. Earlier in this paper, I discussed the notion of hybridization and the contradictory nature of modern thinkers—their dismissal of hybridization while participating in it. Marx's moment is such a moment. He wants to uphold a type of purity while mucking about and theorizing a hybridity that disrupts this purity but then quickly disavows this theorizing as

impossible. And as Moten properly asserts, Marx must deny the commodity speaking or shrieking, as is the case, because it interrupts the economic system of value and exchange that Marx is interesting in critiquing. The speaking commodity signals an anarrangement, an invagination, an augmentation of the systems of exchange, contradicting the notion that these systems of exchange bring it to life. The object maintains an agency, a value before exchange. Quite simply, if the dumb body of the commodity speaks, shrieks, utters, performs in any way, then it interrupts, disrupts, and "embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign. Such embodiment is also bound to the (critique of) reading and writing oft conceived by clowns and intellectuals as the natural attributes of whoever would hope to be known as human" (Moten 12). Thus, the speaking commodity breaks Marx's subjunctive imagining. Moten argues that Douglass in recounting Aunt Hester's shriek creates a theory of value based in the subjectivity of the commodity, of the object, based in what Marx cannot imagine; and thus Douglass predicts the future because he imagines what does not exist. He embodies and articulates what Alain Badiou would call the "new possibility" or making the new political art—making the invisible visible[21]. For Moten, this is the origins of black performance, the "material degradations" that deconstruct and reconstruct value, the theory of value, and theories of value; black performance in all its literary, phonic, and visual iterations anticipates the new and creates it through anarrangements and improvisation.

And how might this be of use when encountering Phillis Wheatley, her poetry, and Jefferson's non-critique critique? It might be obvious, but please allow me this bit of obviousness. Jefferson is in the position of Marx. He can imagine religion producing a Wheatley, but he cannot imagine her being a poet. Like Marx, he cannot imagine the commodity speaking. And if we use the

[21] See Alain Badiou, "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art" (available at http://www.lacan.com/frameXXIII7.htm)

Moten's critique of Marx as a heuristic to read Jefferson's dismissal of Wheatley, then Jefferson's refusal to critique Wheatley's poetry (remember, he scoffs that it is below the dignity of criticism) becomes less about his unwillingness to grant Wheatley full humanity. Jefferson will not grant Wheatley's poetry a critiquing pen because such a critique would disrupt the economies of knowledge and power that Jefferson seeks to reify within his scholarly investigations. If Jefferson offers Wheatley's work a critique, then he offers democracy to the object. He also indirectly critiques slavery, a system of domination that he is quite invested in. Wheatley's poems and her body also critique the sign of poetry, the economy of publishing.

'How can property steal property?' This question animates the ontological conundrum of a slave running away as well as the dilemma of a slave poet hailing herself into the economies and discourse of canon and economy. How can property possess agency? Is it possible for something that is considered owned, something that is an extension of the master's will, to defy its master? Wheatley's poems perform a similar linguistic and philosophical questioning and razing. Is it possible for the object to bring itself into the economies of exchange, to understand its value without being called into the market by another? Quite simply, how can property create property? The black citizen-object, in the form of Wheatley and her poems, creates a radical future that is at once (un)(sur)real for Jefferson and threatening. Wheatley calls a new tradition, an addition to the American literary canon, into being; she extends democracy of language, locality and agency to the object with and without permission. Despite the recognizability of Wheatley's work—its adherence to the received forms of the day, to received notions of metrical regularity, to received notions of citation and allusion, its references to classical allusions, Wheatley's verse is still

impossible for Jefferson[22]. It is incongruous. Despite Wheatley's first poem, "To Maecenas," invoking Maecenas, referencing Homer, the Nine Muses of Helicon Hill, Patroclus, Achilles, and Parnassus, trafficking in the recognizably intelligent discourse of learnedness, the poem and Wheatley's work in general articulates an incomprehensibility, an invisibility, a nothing. The poems are improvisatory even as they enact forms, modes, and metric patterns from the Anglo-American and English tradition. The "new" narrative of her body, the new intelligence that this body brings to the genre creates disruption, creates a distortion. She 'funks up the joint' despite her and her poetic persona striving to comprehend the "bright jewel" of virtue in "On Virtue," the second poem in the manuscript (Wheatley 11).

In fact, the ordering of the poems in *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* is Wheatley's attempt to negotiate and subvert the reading public's fear of the funk of her poetic body. In "To Maecenas," the first poem of the manuscript, Wheatley constantly apologizes for the inadequacy of her fumbling, poetic tongue. In reference to her feeble poetic imagination, she writes in the third stanza: "But here I sit, and mourn a grov'ling mind / That fain would mount, and ride upon the wind" (10). And the fourth stanza ends with her apologizing for her inability to create delightful music in the verse; she writes: "But I less happy, cannot raise the song, / The fault' ring

[22] Because so much has been written on the politics and aesthetics of Phillis Wheatley as a neoclassicist, I will not recapitulate or reproduce the same close-readings and arguments that scholars like William Robinson and John C. Shields. See *Critical Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, ed. William H. Robinson (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982). To see scholarly discussion on Wheatley's as a neoclassicist, see William W. Cook and James Tatum, "The Leisure Moments of Phillis Wheatley," from *African American Writers & Classical Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 7-47. See also Colleen Glenney Boggs, "Transatlantic education: Phillis Wheatley's neoclassicism," in *Transnationalism and American Literature: Literary Translations 1773-1892* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 37-60. See also Julian Mason, "Examples of Classical Myth in the Poems of Phillis Wheatley" in *American Women and Classical Myths*, ed. Gregory A. Staley (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2009), 23-33. See also Russell Reising, "The Whiteness of the Wheatleys: Phillis Wheatley's Revolutionary Poetics," in *Loose Ends: Closure & Crisis in the American Social Text* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996), 73-115. See also Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (New York: Civitas Books, 2003).

music dies upon my tongue" (10). But we should not so quickly believe Wheatley's many overtures concerning her lyrical inadequacies. Despite her decrying her "grov'ling mind," Wheatley creates an eye rhyme, a visual rhyme, at the end of the third stanza with "mind" and "wind" that draws our attention to the poet's hand and mind. The eye rhyme at the end of third stanza echoes the end rhymes that occurred earlier in the stanza (page/Sage, arise/suprize), but, in its echo with difference, the eye rhyme makes the reader aware of the deviation. This deviation performs subversively and ironically. In jarring the reader out of the expectation of a sonic end rhyme, Wheatley makes the reader aware that she is the one that controls the verse. And because it's an eye rhyme and not merely two end words that don't sonically chime, Wheatley makes us aware of the verse and her as its maker. This moment echoes back to her frontispiece. You will witness the poet. You will witness her thinking, writing. You will witness her working. The poet will not disappear behind the Veil of well-wrought neoclassical verse[23]. Wheatley wants her reader to be aware of the sweat and funk of her labor. This labor is not a slave labor nor is it the labor of a free human; it is a labor akin to both while being neither.

In the moment of that couplet at the end of the third stanza of "To Maecenas," Wheatley reinforces and reproduces for her white audience the inadequacies that they need to believe she possesses, and concomitantly, she subverts them. She performs what I call a type of ontological choreography. I borrow this term and concept from Charis Thompson in *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies*, a book that discusses reproductive technologies and its intersection with feminism. Even though this book and its theoretical, ontological, and epistemological concerns are situated in the academic discipline of science and technology studies, I

[23] The "Veil" used in this sentence is me signifying on DuBois's use of the "Veil" in *Souls of Black Folk.*

find her discussion of "making parents" applicable in the discussion of Wheatley "making" herself visible and orderly. In *Making Parents,* Thompson defines ontological choreography as "the dynamic coordination of the technical, scientific, kinship, gender, emotional, legal, political and financial aspects of ART (assisted reproductive technologies)…These elements have to be coordinated in highly staged ways so as to get on with the task at hand: producing parents, children, and everything that is needed for their recognition as such" (8). Thompson argues that part of the process of assisted reproductive technologies is the "making" of parents, coordinating a process so that those who desire to be parents can become so through medical, legal, and political procedures. The medical procedures coupled with these other disciplinary technologies become endowed with symbolic resonance as well. Through these processes and procedures, those that desire to be parents begin the process of subordinating themselves to the disciplinary assumptions of parenting. In other words, the would-be parents begin to render themselves recognizable as such, as parents. Wheatley performs a similar sort of choreography in the ordering of her poems and in the apologizing for her poetic ineptitude in "To Maecenas." Wheatley choreographs the recognizably inadequate and concomitantly coordinates the recognizably poetic. This poem must appear first in the manuscript because she must at once perform awareness of the mytho-historic tradition of poetry and concomitantly reject her genius. Wheatley must offer to her reader that she "cannot raise the song," and yet produce a well-timed and well-sounding clang at the end of the fourth stanza with "song" and "tongue," which produces a new sound, a new harmony, what Moten might call an anarrangement. What I am calling a clang rather than a chime (or rhyme) exemplifies the deliberately playing the wrong note at the right time. While song and "wrong" would produce what would be recognized as a more mellifluous rhyme, Wheatley anchors the end of the lines with

"song" and "tongue." The hard g sounds perform like a flatted fifth in a I-V-VII chord in jazz. Once again, because Wheatley draws our ear to these hard sounds, we are made aware of Wheatley, the fashioner of the verse. In other words, Wheatley is singing off-key while singing on-key on purpose. This singing on and off-key is akin to way in which in jazz no note is off limits. And I don't mention jazz merely for metaphorical purposes. Her work predicts the new, the impossible, and the invisible of improvisation in both jazz and hip hop. Her work is, at once without an ancestry and at once with ancestry. It is the prefiguration of all black expressive culture. It is one of the literary and aesthetic roots of jazz and contemporary African-American art.

Wheatley's ontological choreography does not end with the end of "To Maecenas." In "On Virtue," the poem that follows to Maecenas as the second poem in the manuscript, Wheatley continues to coordinate her ontology as black citizen-object and poet through its juxtaposition of Wheatley's body and her meditation on the profundity of virtue. Aware of the funk of her black and gendered, body, Wheatley understands she must address her readers' assumptions of her uncleanliness, moral lassitude, and sexual lasciviousness. Through a meditation on virtue, Wheatley brings her "soul" in relation to virtue, a relationship that would ameliorate her reading public's concerns for a potential immoral encounter with a black body, and concomitantly her meditation on virtue allows her to occupy the position of virtuous, a subversive position because it puts her subjectivity and her subjectivity's virtue in conversation and in relationship with white women's. As scholars and writers like Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Harriet Jacobs have discussed, black bodies, particularly black women's bodies, were not considered to be sites of virtue; in fact,

they inspired quite the opposite[24]. Black women's bodies were often seen, produced, and reproduced as sites of moral depravity and sexual wantonness. Wheatley side-steps the reproduction of her body as a site of moral depravity through absenting her body throughout the poem. The only body encountered is Virtue's body. And in the encounter of Virtue's body with Wheatley's (or Wheatley's persona) body, Wheatley's body is covered by Virtue; in other words, Virtue obscures Wheatley's body and the potential funk of her ontological body ("the soul"). Wheatley writes: "But, O my soul, sink not into despair, / *Virtue* [her emphasis] is near thee, and with gentle hand / Would now embrace thee, hovers o'er thine head" (11). Virtue provides a 'beard,' a mask, a cover.

I use the term 'beard' here because I do mean to call to and signify toward queer signification. And I would not be the first to read Wheatley queerly. In fact, Tom O. McCulley in "Queering Phillis Wheatley," which can be found in *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley* edited by John C. Shields, puts Wheatley's "To S.M. a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works" in conversation and in relation to Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Tendencies* (Mc Cully 191-93). For McCulley (and for me as well), the queering of Phillis Wheatley relies less on "the restrictive idea that "queer" can only be situated within the limitations of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered body. Citing Sedgwick's declaration that ""…a lot of the most exciting recent work around 'queer' spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and

[24] For discussion of black women as always already in the act of sex, see Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. See also Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997). See also Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2009).

other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses…,"" McCulley turns to Wheatley's use of subversive performativity. McCully argues that in Wheatley performing in the voice of others and through the act of silencing her muse in "To S.M.," she effectively closets her voice and performs from the closet, and in so doing, she makes her reader aware of her own hushed and closeted voice and self which are the malicious repercussions of slavery. This type of subversive performativity that McCully ascribes to Wheatley—the performance of her poet self and selves—jives with the aforementioned discussion of her choreographing her ontology. Wheatley performs 'other' while also performing and 'funking' and mucking about with notions of human. Through Wheatley performing recognizability and the recognizably poetic, she immediately defamiliarizes its familiarity, thus drawing attention to her own ontology, to her ontology as object.

While McCully's read of Wheatley in terms of the closet is a much needed intervention in Wheatley criticism and scholarship, I would like to extend his reading of queer Wheatley to the realm of the erotic, that of the homoerotic and homosocial (comm)union. Extending the queering of Wheatley to the realm of the erotic does not necessarily contradict my earlier assertion that Wheatley is aware of the funk of her sexualized and gendered body and therefore interested in rebuking these circumscriptions of her body and subjectivity. In fact, the communion that Wheatley articulates in "On Virtue" between herself and Virtue (who she feminizes) and her awe at the refulgent beauty of Imagination (who she also feminizes) in "On Imagination" helps to rebuff these stereotypical circumscriptions by opening up a zone of eroticism that is in praise of the feminine and communing with the feminine. As Caroline Wigginton, professor of Women and Gender Studies and American Studies at Rutgers University, discussed in her colloquium at the Newberry Library in February of 2012, Wheatley participated in women-only prayer circles with

Susanna Wheatley, her master, in Boston and was often the toast of these homosocial circles. Wigginton also argues that Wheatley is able to engender community and communal bonds with these aristocratic women through Wheatley's elegies for the dead, particularly dead children (Wigginton 25). Wigginton argues that Wheatley's elegies create a technology by which Wheatley can not only express the sentiments of white mourning, but she can also express the sentiments of black mourning, which would have been ignored, in these all-white and all-female spaces. And concomitantly, Wheatley creates a homosocial bond and erotic relationship between those that experience death and must remain to deal with the aftermath—mourning. Through mourning and elegy, Wheatley brokers relationships with white women that allow for an intimacy that would have been seen as unconscionable and out of order.

Wheatley's erotic communions are not just articulated through biographical data, but they are also articulated in her relationship with Virtue in "On Virtue." Virtue is "near thee [Wheatley's soul], and with gentle hand / Would now embrace thee,…" (Wheatley 11). Virtue does more than merely embrace Wheatley's hand. She also "hovers" over Wheatley's soul's metaphoric head. I read this 'hovering' as covering as well as a type of erotic union that does not merely signal the protective covering of a parent or guardian. Virtue's embrace does not merely ward off sin or a potential attacker. No, this union is a 'courting' between Wheatley's soul and Virtue that ultimately leads to a "promis'd bliss." It's hard not read this "promis'd bliss" without any erotic connotations. In fact, this type of erotic union between Wheatley's soul and Virtue prefigures and reminds this reader of Whitman's erotic communion with his soul in Section five of *Song of Myself* when he writes of his lover (and his soul) parting his shirt and plunging his tongue into "his bare-stript heart" (Whitman 4). Wheatley's courting and union with Virtue performs a similar sort of

union. While the language is less overtly descriptive of a sexual union, the union between Wheatley's soul and Virtue is no less erotic, ecstatic, or wonder-ful. As Jennifer Billingsley notes in "Works of Wonder, Wondering Eyes, and the Wondrous Poet: The Use of Wonder in Phillis Wheatley's Marvelous Poetics," Wheatley often trafficked in wonder through the making of objects of wonder (her poems). And concomitantly, Wheatley hoped to inspire wonder in her readers when they encountered her wonderful objects. As Billingsley notes, wonder contains within it and is in relationship to notions of the sublime (159-164). Thus, wonder becomes an interesting heuristic to read Wheatley's ecstatic and erotic union with Virtue, the "bliss" of the union. Wheatley's union with Virtue performs not only an erotic communion but a welcoming obscuring of her body. Through what seems like a re-invigoration of the classical devotion to Platonic ideals—the extolling of Virtue's virtue and beauty, Wheatley's able to assuage her readers' fear of her funkiness and coordinately obscure the potential disorder of her body entering into the marketplace. Inordinately aware of her reception, Wheatley negotiates the improvisation which is the making of the African American literary canon through creating erotic bonds of union through mourning, death, elegy, and homosocial erotics. While this type of queer poetics might seem, at first, contradictory, it is not. Wheatley creates an opaque weave of breaks and interruptions that ultimately perform a subversive citationality which in turn creates a semblance of (subversive) order.

And order is exactly what Jefferson in his non-critique critique of Wheatley is thoroughly concerned with. Another reading of the Jefferson's non-critical critical reading of Wheatley is that he finds her out of order; her body and poems entering the early American economies of publishing and letters is conceived of as unfit, diseased and alien. Jefferson understands that acknowledging

Wheatley's work is not about acknowledging her as human; it's actually acknowledging her as an object with subjectivity, extending democracy, language, and art to the object. Jefferson's dismissal is not a refusal of humanity; it's a refusal to raze modernity. However, Jefferson is cut doubly and contradicts himself. Much in the way that Marx 'subjunctively' imagines, Jefferson 'subjunctively' critiques even as he refuses to critique. His dismissal is an acknowledgement; a trafficking in what he does not believe exists. When he refuses to intellectually encounter Wheatley's work, he nevertheless admits its is-ness, it's there-icity. Though he would like to keep literary criticism pure, he presupposes and participates in its hybridity, in the trafficking of black bodies across the printed page. Wheatley's agency and poetics force Jefferson to encounter her; Wheatley forces him to make a space for the black citizen-object in the future of literary criticism even as he disavows the possibility. He cannot banish her to realm of the commodity that does not speak. This commodity speaks and speaks wonderfully. Thus, even as Jefferson refuses to engage, Wheatley's radical subjectivity compels him forward, compels him to do what he would not. She produces within him a stutter.

Wheatley's body as visual stutter, as radical disruption is not only made manifest in those that would not critique Wheatley, but it also made manifest in those that would critique her, offer her their support. In one of the three prefaces that precede Wheatley's first collection of poems, *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*, eighteen gentlemen of Boston's aristocracy attest to the fact that Wheatley did write the poems in the book. While Wheatley-scholar, Dwight McBride doubts that any examination even occurred, nevertheless a letter stating the opposite appears in the prefatory material; and the necessity for the "To the Publick" statement is what concerns this thinker. Whether or not eighteen gentlemen appeared in a room to examine the mental (and

possibly physical) fitness of Wheatley is moot and irrelevant when considering that the letter appears in the paratext. The letter serves a function beyond its alleged recording of a historical event. And the function of the letter is our concern. Why include it? What service does it perform?

If we examine the letter closely, the first thing that is noticed is its salutation—"To the Publick." The salutation does more than offer a greeting. It makes Wheatley, a private object, public. Because of Wheatley's position as property, all her work (literal and figurative) belonged to her master, John Wheatley. Therefore, her entering into the marketplace on her own accord would have placed her oh so gentle readers in a moral, political, and economic conundrum. Thus, this letter along with John Wheatley's letter helps to create a chain of ownership, a citational circumscription that assuages the potential perversity, subversion, and funk of Wheatley entering into the various marketplaces. The letter makes her work palatable and officially open for consumption. It tames the potential of her sublimity, her potential to overwhelm the reader. This letter, which is the last prefatory material before the poems, a significant position indeed, promises the public, the reader, that the work will be caged, tempered, and brought into order. "To the Publick" also announces that this work conforms to bourgeoisie manner and morals. Moreover, the letter helps to bring Wheatley's funk, the disorder of her body into subjection, putting her back into her place while she is yet out of it. Because of Wheatley's notoriety as the 'sable poetess' and the newspaper ad soliciting buyers for the book, the reading public would have been aware of her, her body, her skin, her object-ness. In order to counteract the public's terror at this publication (remember, this is the time when New Englanders regularly tarred, feathered, exiled, maimed and killed writers that they felt were morally and politically reprobate), this letter which vouches for the legitimacy of the poems and their penning by the 'sable poetess.' As the publisher notes: "AS it

has been repeatedly suggested to the Publisher, by Persons, who have seen the Manuscript, that Numbers would be ready to suspect they were not reallh the Writings of PHILLIS, he has procured the following Attestation" (8). The publisher admits to the reader that he has done due diligence in making sure that these poems are in fact Wheatley's, and that they are not some hoax or ruse to beguile the reader. In fact, the publisher protects his ethos with the attestation which was written and signed by the "most respectable Characters in *Boston*, that none might have the least Ground for disputing their *Original*" (8).

The attestation, which is only a paragraph long, quells the transgression and funk of Wheatley's status as commodity through re-writing and controlling her biographical body. The letter states:

> WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

Immediately, what is noticed is the capitalization of "we," which was a standard publishing practice at the time. However, the "WE" still articulates a junta of power, the iconic status of the undersigned. These men, the undersigned, are cultural, political, and religious arbiters of New England life. Therefore, their "WE," a masculine, gendered consortium of power carries more cultural, linguistic, and political capital than a "we" made up of free blacks of Boston or a "we" made up of white female abolitionist. Their "WE" is a precursor and a prefiguration of the "WE, the People, of these United States." It is a founding father "WE," a "We" that seeks to reify, produce,

reproduce, and extend its own power. And this attestation helps them do such. In the vernacular, it might be said that they are 'writing her ticket.' And the byproduct of writing someone's ticket is that you extend and reproduce your own cultural power. In writing Wheatley's biography in the form of the attestation, they perform a transgression that denotes privilege and position; however, it does not upset class hierarchy. It just reasserts their own status. In their witnessing to the world, they perform a raising of Wheatley from the be-low to the classical. As scholars like Fred Wilderson and Saidiya Hartman note, slaves fell below civil society[25]. They were not the even the proletariat. Slaves were outside of civil society and discourses of political agency; they were marked and marketed in these systems of exchange as objects, tools, extensions of the master's body. Therefore, these eighteen Boston Brahmin's declaration brings Wheatley into a new order, into a new level of fitness, because after all that is what is at stake. This attestation is nothing more than a clean bill of literary health. Again, interrogate the language. Words like "qualified," "examined," and "Judges" pepper the last sentence of the attestation. Even if the alleged examination did not occur, it is still necessary for these gentlemen to lend their names, ethos, and credibility to Wheatley's poems. The attestation brings Wheatley into subjection. She is a poet not because of the poems but because these gentlemen say so. This hailing of Wheatley into the realm of author is similar to the conversation of taxonomies and class division in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.* In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression,* Stallybrass and White describe the taxonomies of class divisions that sprung forth from ancient taxation codes based upon "the classic Author" as a way of thinking through notions of high and low, above and below, order

[25] See Fred Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" (*Social Identities* 9.2 (2003)), 225-240. See also Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

and disorder. "Classici," what we now know as classical, were the elite writers in the highest tax bracket while "the proletarius" were the commoners in the lowest tax bracket. This model which was originally used for literary distinction then became associated with class distinction as well. Wheatley's biographical reconfiguring, mentioning that she was once "uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*" but is now "qualified" to write these poems because of her "Disadvantage," being made a slave, is the raising of Wheatley to the level of classical author; she has attained the sophistication through her "Disadvantage." Here, we witness the gentlemen covering themselves. They cannot forthrightly support slavery, but they also have to be careful not to offend the abolitionist-heavy Northern sensibility. Therefore, they must parry even as they strike. Wheatley's position as object requires them to toe a very thin line because they cannot fully extend her democracy. They must sanitize or even purify but not entirely. Her body is still shrieking.

And what are the implications of this assessment, of this piece of literary criticism, particularly if we take Hazel Irvin and other scholars' assertion that this letter is the first piece of African-American literary criticism to be true?[26] What, then, is the ontology and epistemological concerns of African-American literary criticism? If this attestation is the Ur-text, the first piece in the citational chain called African-American literary criticism, then it is not too bold to posit that African-American literary criticism as a tradition and genre is interested in bringing the black body and its subsequent literary and artistic productions into subjection, into order. The goal of the criticism is to attest to the fitness of the text as opposed to investigating the presiding intelligence, the presiding genius that negotiates the signs, signifiers, and signifieds. African-American literary

[26] If more time and space permitted, I would argue that the attestation is not the first piece of African-American literary criticism. In fact, Wheatley, herself, produces the first piece of African-American literary criticism with her own preface.

critics play the role of the Boston Brahmin; they make the work of the object palatable and ready for the market; in other words, they make the work human. The African-American literary critical tradition borne out of this Wheatley criticism, thus, refuses the object its democracy, its language, its locality. Literary criticism of black texts becomes about smoothing out the narrative, reducing the illegibility of the black texts. If not careful, African-American literary criticism performs the erasure of a complex and complicated relationship between text, marketplace, and ideas of the black citizen-object. Rather than providing intellectual engagement that amplifies the text, African-American literary criticism becomes a place of sequestering, a place where the hair of black aesthetics receives a perm or a straight comb. The shriek which is the original anarrangement and critique of Enlightenment rationality and linguistic universalism becomes a warble barely audible above the discourse of transparency that is the Academy. The shriek becomes iterable, knowable; it linguistically loses its funk which was and is its power.

The black body's shriek can also be understood as a type of stutter, to invoke the language of Avital Ronnell in *Stupidity*. The black body interrupts the grammars and technologies of rationality, not because there is something innately in blackness that does so but because of the constructed nature of blackness within this system of logic; the black body is constructed as a shriek, a scream. Burke's blind boy horrified at the sight of the black woman, Wheatley's first critics, I contend, are not merely the reaction of one boy to one woman or an isolated incident of unpreparedness by Wheatley's critics, but it is the reaction of scholarship and The Academy to aesthetic and intellectual productions made by black citizen-objects in general. The black body subverts, stultifies, and arrests the movement of the mind. And here is where I depart from Moten, again. Moten's interests lie in the purposeful black shriek, the intentional scream, what he would

call radical. However, in only attending to the purposeful shriek by artists and writers such as Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, Adrian Piper and Amiri Baraka, he ignores the way in which blackness shrieks in general; he ignores the radicality of the formal, the received, the traditional, the seen-before in the hands and mouths of black performers and artists in general, as Phillis Wheatley is an example of. And if not careful, this eliding will conflate the black avant-garde with real or authentic agency; and, black freedom and the quest for black freedom become falsely associated with a type avant-garde and a type of black radicalism, a radicalism that is recognizably rending and razing form, dismantling the master's house through shouting down its walls. In fact, his citation of Aunt Hester's shriek in Douglass's slave narrative as the protean or ur-shriek of a contemporary, radical shriek unduly circumscribes its potential and reach. In other words, Aunt Hester's shriek connects only to the citation of shrieking as found in the work of Adrian Piper and Abby Lincoln, but it also connects to the work of Natasha Trethewey and Phillis Wheatley. Aunt Hester's shriek belongs to an archive of terror, an archive of shrieking that informs not just the work of those that seek to rend the very fabrics of form and tradition but to those that inhabit received forms and traditions. In fact, Aunt Hester's shriek, as a scene of subjection not mediated through a contrivance or artifice or a learnedness, is another manifestation of the folk. There is an everydayness, a banality to Aunt Hester's scream. Enslaved Africans were beat often as a means of control, as a means of bringing the black body into order. Therefore, there is a banality to the horror. And when I use banality, I do not use the term to mean a lack of rigor, but I use the term to connote familiarity, the everyday. The whippings and the subsequent shrieking were vulgar in the truest sense of its Latin root; they were popular; they occurred often; they occurred every day. If it is understood that these beatings and shrieking occurred regularly, then it is not out of line to call Aunt Hester's shrieking and the

shrieking of other slaves throughout the Diaspora part of a folk tradition. And part of the avant-garde tradition as Moten so justly asserts.

However, this juxtaposition of the folk and the avant-garde, this bringing them into relation is surreal but quite useful. It is surreal in its unexpectedness, in its defamiliarizing of the familiar, in its sense of juxtapostion[27]. Anthropologist Mary Douglass might call this juxtaposition 'matter out of place.'[28] However, unlike Douglas, I will not denude or invisibilize the power of this juxtaposition by calling it dirt or refuse, something that must be dismissed as terrible in its very "operation," to beckon back to Burke's dismissal of the blackness. Instead, I will call it what it is: Black Western Thought, a tradition that heretofore existed but does not get acknowledged or reified as such because of the way the black body, blackness, black aesthetic and intellectual productions produce stutters, shrieks, and screams when they come in contact with the Enlightenment project of rationality and discourse, a project that continues to saturate the very walls and carpet of institutions of higher learning (i.e The Academy). Aunt Hester's shriek, Phillis Wheatley, W.E.B. DuBois, Louis Armstrong, Abbey Lincoln, Adrian Piper, Natasha Trethewey, Amiri Baraka, and even Fred Moten are examples of the large continuum of the black intellectual tradition. And what connects them is the archive of terror, the shrieks and screams that signal the corporeality and ontology of the black citizen-object. Black Western Thought or the black intellectual tradition is not a mere recapitualization of western thought through a black lens, a proverbial black-washing of the philosophical, rhetorical, and rational traditions from Socrates to Foucault, but it is an investigation of the philosophy, ontology, and epistemology of the black

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[27] I borrow the he notion of defamiliarizing the familiar from Victor Shklovsky's "Art as Device." See Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 1-14.
[28] See Mary Douglass, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

citizen-object, those whose subjectivity is a mixture of markets and mayhem. Though nurtured on the monuments, ruins, and discourses of Western thought and its pursuit towards a better understanding and making of humanity, Black Western thought is not interested in merely investigating the human experience. It is always, consciously and subconsciously, interacting with and investigating the (citational) history of the black object. And this investigation creates a distortion in the Western canon, an advertent and sometimes inadvertent stutter that causes The Academy to wince or scowl or merely dismiss it as noise. Purity is not allowed to traffic itself as a coin that has forgotten its fictional value. The black intellectual and aesthetic tradition, as I emphasized earlier consciously and subconsciously, calls into question the neat bifurcation of the human/nonhuman divide. What I am calling for is more conspicuous and deliberate exploration of this hybridity without the necessity of generalizing or turning over the whole project to the better making of humanity. What I am calling Black Western Thought is about advocating and extending democracy to the object and anthropologically and aesthetically investigating the object for its sake as opposed to investigating the object as a way of bringing it back into subjection, back into the order of the human. If the human, humanity, modernity is decentered, then all of the attendant exclusionary practices, discussions of margin and center, deaths (social and real), and categories are jettisoned for a more expansive idea of difference.

Chapter 3: Playing with the Dark: A Surreal (A)calculation of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

SQUIRE REEVES

If we take the charge of the last chapter—that we should move away from the normalization technologies of the Enlightenment and the Academy, then we move into the direction of what Eduoard Glissant in *The Poetics of Relation* called opacity. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant defines the opaque as that which resists the requirement of transparency in Western thought. Glissant's notion of opacity razes the stable ground of relationality that requires difference be brought into similarity thus rebuffing scholars like Lewis Gordon who claim that the work of difference helps to further alienate the Other from systems of power and exchange[29]. Glissant petitions for the dismantling of norming, the dismantling of hierarchies that seek to *allow* for difference yet subordinate it or enclose it 'within an impenetrable autarchy.' In other words, the need to scale difference in relationship to the norm is rejected. Glissant writes:

> Opacities can coexist, converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. There would be something great and noble about initiating such a movement, referring not to Humanity but to the

[29] In *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, Lewis R. Gordon argues that "The written language of the West and its alphabetical systems betray an economy of power." Furthermore, Gordon argues that in the challenging of these systems of power black folks should not simply choose the other end of the dialectic. Gordon writes: "But should we not draw out a dialectical response here by not writing in the forms of the West or, even more locally, the forms of the variety groups to which we may belong? (170)" For Gordon, writing that challenges, subverts, or troubles 'the written languages of the West' and its concomitant 'economy of power' risk unintelligibility that black folks cannot afford because it has the potential to be unintelligible to black people, the very people it seeks to liberate from these economies of power. Using Glissant's notion of opacity, I am challenging Gordon's assertion that interrupting the grammars and technologies of knowing, interrupting the economy of power will further disenfranchise black intellectuals and artists. See Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 170.

> exultant divergence of humanities. Thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality. Every Other is a citizen and no longer a Barbarian (190).

Glissant aspires to and thus removes the Other from the lexicon of relationality. He flattens the field. Or, we can read it as Glissant destroying the masters' houses and not erecting another house in its stead. In Glissant's notion of opacity, Citizen relates to Citizen. Despite the similarity of naming they exist within a field of difference. This notion of multiple opacities coexisting, converging, and weaving fabrics also speaks to a type of overlapping or hybridity. Rather, than looking toward purity, opacity allows for multiple traditions to intersect. For instance, an art piece can be both folk and avant-garde. A scholarly project can be at once authoritative and multi-voiced, creative and critical. A multi-tongued-ness, a heteroglossia of meaning and discourse can willfully occupy the same scholastic, intellectual, and aesthetic place[30]. Opacity does not require that everything be rendered intelligible for the human. As a paradigm, it is not interested in "the old obsession," bringing everything into subjection for the purpose of human manipulation. Instead, under the rubric of opacity, we relish in the jagged narrative, the tangle, the stutter, what Moten calls the break. Black Western Thought, for instance, does not become an aping of Europeanized scholarship but a scholarship that celebrates its mixed-raced ancestry, its miscegeny (my term), melding all of these traditions, crafts, forms, disciplines, and archives to produce something akin to scholarship, that explores the subjectivity of the object, the black object. This moving past the

[30] In using the term heteroglossia, I am referring to Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the multi-voice nature of the novel. In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin argues that the novel is a "a diversity of social speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages and diversity of individual voices, artitstically organized" (32). See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology,* ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 32-44. I am also in conversation with Mae Henderson's work on heteroglossia and glossolalia. See Mae Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl Wall (Rutgers UP, 1989).

desire to understand 'what lies at the bottom of natures' remonstrates the need for transparency, the need for knowability; thus we can take a little more "obscurity" in our coffee. Moving past transparency or deciding that transparency is no longer the only goal also forestalls and opposes the terror enacted in the sublime. The sublime—which can be understood as difference that does not produce pleasure and subsequently cannot be subjugated—creates an interaction, a social experience in which the spectator is at war with the object, with difference. In other words, the spectator is put into peril because he or she cannot bring the viewed object into order, into a pre-arranged and pre-decided beauty. Under opacity, difference is not something that produces conflict or feelings of contestation. Instead, opacity creates an open field. With an open field, the desire to colonize, tame, understand, or reduce difference is supplanted by the desire to fully encounter the confluences and weaves. As Glissant offers in the long quote above, if opacity is foregrounded, then the texture of the weave supplants the desire to know its nature. Glissant writes: "The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence" (191). Accepting irreducibility allows for the complicated; it allows for the art or subjectivity to proliferate and defy the smashing down of experience into a certain set of agreed upon codes. These codes which act as a shorthand, a metonymic economy of representation, are no longer allowed to forget their coinage, the falseness of their supremacy in an economy of exchange. Opacity advocates for a rejection of universalism, a rejection of the Hegelian notion of spirit. Thus, opacity becomes a more robust intellectual tool for investigating the black citizen-object and its attendant shrieks as speech as songs, its attendants shrieks as criticism as philosophy.

With opacity, we play with the dark as opposed to 'playing in the dark.' And I am not trying to disparage Morrison's rigorous, robust, and deeply valuable work on whiteness and the literary imagination; quite the opposite. In fact, I will play along with Morrison much in the way I did with Moten; however, I will remix the tune a bit to advocate for playing with black citizen-objects as opposed to playing in. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison introduces her inquiry with a prefatory anecdote. She recalls reading *The Words to Say It* by Marie Cardinal because of the way in which "it spoke the full agenda and unequivocal goal of the writer" (Morrison v). However, while reading the autobiographical novel, she had one question that "insisted upon itself": at what moment did Cardinal become aware of her mental illness, what Cardinal calls "The Thing?" Morrison's answer came about forty pages in. I will cite the original Cardinal because of it will be useful in my own analysis. Cardinal writes:

> My first anxiety attack occurred during a Louis Armstrong concert. I was nineteen or twenty. Armstrong was going to improvise with his trumpet, to build a whole composition in which each note would be important and would contain within itself the essence of the whole. I was not disappointed: the atmosphere warmed up very fast. The scaffolding and flying buttress of the jazz instruments supported Armstrong's trumpet, creating space which were adequate enough for it to climb higher, establish itself, and take off again. The sounds of the trumpet sometimes piled up together, fusing a new musical base, a sort of matric which gave birth to one precise, unique note, tracing a sound whose path was almost painful, so absolutely necessary had its equilibrium and duration become; it tore at the nerves of those who followed it.
> My heart began to accelerate, becoming more important than the music, shaking the bars of my rib cage, compressing my lungs so the air could no longer enter them. Gripped by panic at the idea of dying there in the middle of spasms, stomping feet, and the crowd howling, I ran into the street like someone possessed. It was a beautiful cold winter night. People were snug in their

> houses. I ran, and the sound of my running reverberated like a horse galloping in the echo chambers of the avenues, boulevards, and back streets.
> 'I'm going to die, I'm going to die, I'm going to die.'
> My heart was beating to the rapid tempo of the music. I remember a camellia in bloom, glistening, full-blown, in its concrete tub on a street corner, just before plunging into the tunnel which led to the university…I was running…I was agitated, svelte in appearance but torn apart inside..Cars wept by me on this well-traveled route in the city. Pedestrians hurried along its sidewalks. At the far end, a neon sign flashed on and off coquettishly. But nothing could appease me. And so I continued to run (Cardinal 39-40).

As part of a Morrison's reading practice, she kept a file of incidents such as these—incidents where black people "ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them" (Morrison viii). These incidents, for Morrison, pointed her toward the ways in which blackness, figures and personas of blackness participated in the literary imagining of European literatures but were not mentioned. As Morrison notes concerning the passage above, neither Cardinal nor her psychologist nor Bruno Bettelheim, a renowned doctor who wrote both the preface and the afterword to the book, commented on what brought on the attack. Morrison writes: "None of them is interested in what ignited her strong apprehension of death ('I'm going to die!' is what she was thinking and screaming), of physical power out of control ('nothing could appease me. And so I continued to run'), as well as the curious flight from the great improvisation, sublime order, poise, and the illusion of permanence" (Morrison vii). It should be noted here that Marie Cardinal's anxiety attack when encountering Louis Armstrong's solo is very similar to the Dr. Cheselden's and Edmund Burke's once blind boy who glimpsed the black woman and was overcome. In fact, Morrison describes Cardinal's reaction as a flight from the sublime order and genius of the improvisation. Morrison's use of the term sublime corroborates the notion that black

citizen-objects and their subsequent aesthetic and intellectual productions create a sense of despair in the modern citizen. It is not coincidental that Marie Cardinal runs into the dark and finds no solace in the dark; and as Morrison notes, she continues to run and run. Here is where I take a bit of solo, moving off of Morrison's anaylysis a bit. Cardinal has been thrust back into the mirror stage. She must experience the anarrangement that is the break, the cut. Armstrong's soloing reverses her coming into the Symbolic Order, reverses her entering into mastery, mastering of the codes and grammars of civil society, civil discourse. Quite literally, Armstrong drives her mad, drives her back into the wild. While Cardinal notes that the jazz instruments build a scaffolding for Armstrong to climb and build some more through his improvisation, she is constantly being razed; more so, her faculties are being dismantled. How curious and ironic is it that when the black object builds, the white subject is destroyed? It is no coincidence that when Cardinal flees the jazz club that what greets her is the night. And it is no coincidence that the night provides no relief. The night, what Burke has defined as sublime, offers her as much comfort as Armstrong's solo. There is no way out of the sublimity of the moment. There is no way out of the future—the commodity speaking, the black citizen-object reciting and reiterating its value, a value that existed prior to it entering the marketplace. Armstrong's solo, like Douglass reciting Aunt Hester's scream, articulates its own theory of value, choreographs its own ontology. And as Cardinal notes, a new musical base is articulated. As Cardinal asserts, Armstrong's solo 'fuse a new musical base,' which Morrison reads as offering the potential for permanence through the impermanence of Armstrong's improvising (Cardinal 39). Once again, this new permanence, this new music defies order, the Symbolic order and exemplifies the potential razing of previous and agreed upon arrangements of value, order, and economies. Armstrong's playing produces an agonizing delight. The delight

signals a disassembling, a subversion for which there is no relief. Later in that same sentence she ecstatically claims that the new music created a "matrix which gave birth to one precise, unique note, tracing a sound whose path was almost painful, so absolutely necessary had its equilibrium and duration become; it tore at the nerves of those who followed it" (Cardinal 39). It should be noted that she uses the terms fuse, matrix, and pain. Fuse and matrix denote a hybridity, a mixing of categories, that bring about pain because of the way in which it establishes a new order, enervates a break, a cutting.

Armstrong's solo shake the very bars of Cardinal's rib cage.

To take Morrison's analysis a little farther, Cardinal's rib cage become a metonym for the body of modernity and its fitness or lack thereof when it encounters the alleged sublimity of the black object. I know that this is slippery territory—to read a woman's body as a symbol or metaphor for nation, state, abstraction, lack, lost, and imagination. And I do not intend to appropriate Cardinal's literary or corporeal body for the purposes of this scholarship. However, Cardinal creates a literary like-ness of herself, a literary equivalent that traffics in all of the attendant tropes and metaphors that reify notions of blackness as sites and archives of disorder; therefore, if she is trafficking in these metaphors, symbols, and tropes, then she also enters into and traffics in economies and discourses that coordinate with these discourses of blackness such as the discourse and tropes that perpetuated the notion that white women must be protected at all times from the black brute, the non-white Other. In fact, Cardinal's anxiety attack at the brutish, black hands of Armstrong and his horn could be read as a reifying this trope of the brutalizing black, male citizen-object who seeks to deracinate and sully the purity of the white woman. Or once again, it could be read as another colonial encounter. How and why does blackness cause the white

metropole to go crazy? Again, I need to emphasize that I do not seek to remove Cardinal's particularity, the individuality of her narrative. However, I am interested in telescoping out, reading her narrative anthropologically and allegorically. As Morrison notes, Cardinal's narrative 'plays in' notions of blackness that signal "anarchy and routine dread," mucks about in "metaphorical shortcuts" that enact the literary equivalents of the social codes and restrictions that created the "racial disingenuousness" and "moral frailty" of western nations and their literatures. Quite simply, Cardinal's narrative embodies the phobias, sublimations, and neuroses of Western dealings with the black Other, the black citizen-object, particularly as it relates to notions of purity and hybridity. And by extension, modernity and its attendant claims to purity are thrown into question. Cardinal, like the once blind boy, fears death. Something about the black object signals death and launches a full-scale anxiety attack. Morrison notes that rhetorical representations of illness and disorder in literature often use the trope of blackness. Blackness becomes the sign of disease, the breaking apart. Morrison also notes that blackness as a trope for disorder and disease can also occur conceptually—meaning it does not require a black person commit any physical violence. An example of such a rendering of blackness conceptually embodying disease is Marie Cardinal naming the manifestation of her illness The Thing. Cardinal associates the appearance or the origin of The Thing with the realization that "we were to assassinate Algeria," referring to the war between France and its colony, Algeria. Algeria, which Cardinal calls her "real mother," is another manifestation of 'internal devastation aligned with a socially governed relationship with race' (Morrison ix). For Cardinal, as Morrison asserts, blackness, black people, non-white Others "were markers of the benevolent and the wicked," "the spiritual…and the voluptuous," "'sinful' but delicious sensuality coupled with demands for purity and restraint" (ix). In *Playing in the Dark*,

Morrison traces the manner in which white writers manipulate and play in blackness, literally and conceptually, as a way of citing and reciting the codes of conduct and imagination that coordinate and enact the racial disingenuousness of the literary canon and nation.

But what if we play with the dark a little more? What if aesthetic and intellectual productions of black citizen-objects are read through the lens of opacity rather sublimity? What if we examine the effect of these aesthetic productions on white subjects other than as something that inspires a death drive or inspires something else alongside the death drive? Above, I asked the question why is it that when the black object builds, the white subject is razed. I also noted that the night did not provide Cardinal with comfort after having been accosted by Armstrong's solo. What if we played along with these questions and insights a little more? How might be do that?

COUSIN LEROI

Yeah, Youngblood, how are we going to do that?

SQUIRE REEVES

Glad you asked.

DR. BLEDSOE

Squire Reeves, remember your manners.

SQUIRE REEVES

Yes, Doc, I am, and I will. In order to play with the dark, we must turn toward to Ralph Ellison playing with Louis Armstrong. In fact, I would argue that Ellison's playing along and playing with Armstrong in *Invisible Man* is the opacity we have been looking for; it is the black intellectual tradition that is at once surreal, avant-garde, folk-y, and Western. Ellison's prologue plays with the

dark, plays in the weaves, plays in what Glissant refers to as "exultant weaves" of subjectivity. Let us go to the text. In the Prologue to *Invisible Man*, the unnamed narrator sits alone in his cave, in his hole in the basement of an apartment building, stealing electricity for his 1,369 light bulbs, listening to Louis Armstrong playing "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue," bending notes on that military instrument, making a poetry out of invisibility. Armstrong's poetry of invisibility is the phonic articulation of the lack of democracy extended to the black citizen-object over time (history). Because of this invisibility, this opacity, the invisible object has a different sense of time. One is never quite on the beat; one is always a little behind or a little ahead. Ellison's narrator muses: "Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis'music" (8). Louis' music marks invisibility, a marking that does not obey and convene a prescribed sense of order. Often, this different sense of order is read as disorder as evinced by Marie Cardinal's anxiety attack when listening to his music. What if it isn't? What if we examine this sense of time through the lens of opacity? Scholars from Albert Murray to Amiri Baraka, from Hoyt Fuller to Houston Baker have described this phenomenon of marking time as an anarrangement of sound, the deformation of mastery, syncopation, or playing just off the beat as both an aesthetic and political trope[31]. What I would argue is also being articulated in Louis Armstrong's soloing and playing is the playing of a non-

[31] See Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Black Experience &American Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 142-168. See Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1998). Also Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999). See Hoyt Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic" in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1994), 199-206. See Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Also Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

existent archive, an archive that appears and disappears much in the way the history of the black object appears and disappears in the annals of Western culture. Here, I am thinking of the Dutch slave ship Zong that carried some 700 enslaved Africans from the shores of West Africa only to have their fates and lives thrown to the bottom of the ocean by the ship captain so that he might collect the insurance claim[32]. And the only record that exists of the event is a seven hundred word insurance claim and a few court records. Those Africans thrown overboard appeared and disappeared. The archive of the event exists and does not exist at the same time. It exists in that we know that the event happened. But it does not exist in that those seven hundred Africans dissolve into the Atlantic as an indistinguishable mass of limbs and moans. Armstrong's playing along with Ralph Ellison accompanying on vocals seeks to perforate this conundrum of in/visibility. It seeks to arrest the archive, to hold it still, for a bit, even as it disappears. Hence, the narrator's description of the poetics of invisibility as being aware of the nodes and points where time stands still. Time for the invisible citizen, the black object, is made up of breaks, of what Moten would call invaginations. This moment is something like the moment Frantz Fanon calls for in *The Wretched of the Earth*—a new history of man born out of colonial resistance. However, I would extend and remix Fanon's call. What is expressed in Armstrong's horn is the history of the object running alongside the histories of men and women. Armstrong's horn, much like Wheatley's book of poems predicts the future. It is the new history being played in the present. A history born of disappearing—a type of improvisation. However, the poetics of invisibility and the music of invisibility, which excites the death drive the white subject is being mis-read and misheard by the white citizen-subject. I would

[32]See M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2008). See also James Walvin, *Black Ivory* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc. 2001), 2nd Ed.

argue that for the white subject, black performance is a looking back, a looking toward death. But if we examine the same aesthetic outputs (Louis' music, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*) through the lens of opacity, those same aesthetic productions manifest a futurity made of the invisible, made of a history and archive of terror. Black aesthetic objects project a theory of value that opens rather than closes down possibility.

Black performance, black aesthetic productions theorize the future even as they embrace the abjection of the past. In fact, embracing the past and its abjections are a requirement of theorizing the future. It is what the narrator of *Invisible Man* begins to realize in his hole; his future is in the layers of abjection phonically articulated in Armstrong's horn. Ellison's narrator continues his meditating and riffing off of Armstrong's playing; he says:

> …So under the spell of the reefer I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only on time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. And *beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco, and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body, and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo and I heard someone shout:*
>
> *"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.'"*
>
> *And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother, most black…"*
>
> *"In the beginning…"*
>
> *"At the very start," they cried.*
>
> *"…there was blackness…"*
>
> *"Preach it…"*

"…and the sun…"

"The sun, Lawd…"

"…was bloody red…"

"Red…"

"Now black is…" the preacher shouted.

"Bloody…"

"I said black is…"

"Preach it, brother…"

"…an' black aint…"

"Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!"

"Amen, brother…"

"Black will git you…"

"Yes, it will…"

"Yes, it will…"

"…an' black won't…"

"Naw, it won't!"

"It do, Lawd…"

"…an' it don't."

"Halleluiah…"

"…It'll put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY."

"*Preach it, dear brother…"*

"*…an' make you tempt…"*

"*Good God a-mighty!"*

"Old Aunt Nelly!"

"Black will make you…"

"Black…"

"…or black will unmake you."

"Ain't it the truth, Lawd?"

And at that point a voice of trombone timbre screamed at me, "Git out of here, you fool! Is you ready to commit treason?"

And I tore myself away, hearing the old singer of spirituals moaning, "Go curse your God, boy, and die."

I stopped and questioned her, asked he what was wrong.

"I dearly loved my master, son," she said.

"You should have hated him," I said.

"He gave me several sons," she said, "and because I loved my sons I learned to love their father though I hated him too."

"I too have become acquainted with ambivalence," I said. "That's why I'm here."

"What's that?"

"Nothing, a word that doesn't explain it. Why do you moan?"

"I moan this way 'cause he's dead," she said.

"Then tell me, who is that laughing upstairs?"

"Them's my sons. They glad."

"Yes, I can understand that too," I said.

"I laughs too, but I moans too. He promised to set us free but he never could bring hisself to do it. Still I loved him…"

"Loved him? You mean…?"

"Oh yes, but I loved something else even more."

"What more?"

"Freedom."

"Freedom," I said. "Maybe freedom lies in hating."

"Naw, son, it's in loving. I loved him and give him the poison and he withered away like a frost-bit apple. Them boys woulda tore him to pieces with they homemade knives."

"A mistake was made somewhere," I said, "I'm confused." And I wished to say other things, but the laughter upstairs became too loud and moan-like for me and I tried to break out of it, but I couldn't. Just as I was leaving I felt an urgent desire to ask her what freedom was and went back. She sat with her head in her hands, moaning softly; her leather-brown face was filled with sadness.

"Old woman, what is this freedom you love so well?" I asked around a corner of my mind.

She looked surprised, then thoughtful, then baffled. "I done forgot, son. It's all mixed up. First I think it's one thing, then I think it's another. It gits my head to spinning. I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head. But it's a hard job, son. Too much is done happen to me in too short a time. Hit's like I have a fever. Ever' time I starts to walk my head gits to swirling and I falls down. Or if it ain't that, it's the boys; they gits to laughing and wants to kill up the white folks. They's bitter, that's what they is…"

"But what about freedom?"

"Leave me 'lone, boy; my head aches!"

I left her, feeling dizzy myself. I didn't get far.

Suddenly one of the sons, a big fellow six feet tall, appeared out of nowhere and struck me with his fist.

"What's the matter, man?" I cried.

"You made Ma cry!"

"But how?" I said, dodging a blow.

"Askin' her them questions, that's how. Git outa here and stay, and next time you got questions like that, ask yourself!"

He held me in a grip like a cold stone, his fingers fastening upon my windpipe until I thought I would suffocate before he finally let me go. I stumbled about dazed, the music beating hysterically in my ears…

> Then somehow I came out of it, ascending hastily from this underworld of sound to hear Louis Armstrong innocently asking,
>
> *What did I do*
> *To be so black*
> *And blue?*

COUSIN LEROI

Now that's it. That's it.

SQUIRE REEVES

What do you mean, Cousin Leroi?

COUSIN LEROI

That sermon. 'Black is and black ain't.' Come on, pastor.

SQUIRE REEVES

What?

COUSIN LEROI

If you looking to get free, that'll get you free.

DR. BLEDSOE

Squire Reeves?

SQUIRE REEVES

Yes, Doc.

DR. BLEDSOE

If you are looking to get free of this dissertation and move on toward tenure, then I would suggest you get back to the mission at hand, of which I am becoming more and more suspicious of. All this black object this and black object that. Are we not humans?

SQUIRE REEVES

No. We've never been human.

DR. BLEDSOE

Oh, Squire, you are going to have to come into my office to discuss this. Please, forthwith, at once.

SQUIRE REEVES

No, Doc, that's not what we doing.

DR. BLEDSOE

Cousin Leroi, unhand me. Unhand me, sir! Do you see this, Squire Reeves? Do you see what he's doing to me? Unhand me, sir.

SQUIRE REEVES

Go ahead and do what you got to do, Cousin.

(*Cousin Leroi starts towards the wings of the stage with Dr. Bledsoe in hand.)*

Thanks Cousin. But when you get done with ol' Doc. Come back. I want to ask you something about the sermon.

COUSIN LEROI

No problem.

SQUIRE REEVES

(*Direct address to the audience)*

Please pay no attention to the man disappearing behind the screen. While he has proved useful in getting us to this point, he's shown himself to be unnecessary and a potential combatant to the moving of these ideas forward. The doors of the exegetical church are open. Please bring your abjection in, wear it queerly or straight, because in wearing it you have queered the straight and

straightened the queer. Please, sit wherever you would like. We have destroyed the altar and it now only occupies the discarded museums of our minds. Therefore, it is unnecessary to lay prostrate before a piece of wood and confess your sins. They have disappeared too…

(*Walks back to the lectern and continues his lecture)*

And what is this new analytical way of listening to music? What has the narrator of *Invisible Man* discovered? Moten argues that Ellison wants to articulate a listening that is a "seeing." This novel is interested in an ensemble of senses, "an improvisation attuned to the ensemble of work's organization and production, the ensemble of the politico-economic structure in which it is produced and the ensemble of the senses from which it springs and which it simulates" (67). This ensemble defies a pre-determined notion of spectatorship, a prefigured sense of happening. It is as if you showed up to the opera house and the chairs were removed from the concert hall and you yourself were asked to sing or play the clarinet in Puccini's "Madame Butterfly." Ellison's *Invisible Man* reconfigures the notion of assemblage of sense and affect. Listening as a type of reading—the endeavor of the reader encountering *Invisible Man*—and listening as type of theorizing—what the narrator performs in the Prologue of *Invisible Man* creates an art experience that defies norms of spectatorship. Moreover, I would like to extend Moten's reading of *Invisible Man* as an "improvisation attuned to an ensemble" and argue that Ellison's novel assembles an ensemble of abjection, an archive of abjection that opaquely renders the intellectual and philosophical traditions of the West as well as the intellectual and philosophical traditions of the black folk. In this way, Ellison's *Invisible Man* can be understood as a critique of DuBois's "Of the Coming of John," a critique of the notion that blackness does not have its own sense of pedagogy, a presiding

intelligence that can theorize on its own terms. This moment in *Invisible Man*, the narrator's contemplation of the poetics of invisibility and the ontology of blackness and black love, illustrates Glissant's notion of the weave and convergence of fabrics of the opaque, what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari might call the rhizome, a plait or braid of roots that de-hierarchize difference and disavows an origination or "totalitarian root" (Glissant 11). The narrator encounters a confluence of pedagogies that are not easily dissolved into their component parts, not easily rendered transparent.

While the narrator's descending into a cave riffs upon Plato's *The Allegory of Cave*, Ellison's riff does more than Signify or allude; Ellison situating the mytho-imaginative landscape of the narrator in relationship to Plato's Cave, the folk culture of the black church, the pedagogical moment of the sermon and the call-and-response of the parishioners de-stabilizes and subverts the notion of pedagogy, West, Western, thinking, and Western thought; moreover, Ellison's riff de-stabilizes and subverts the notion of who can be the pedagogue and what is the pedagogical. Before we continue with our analysis, we will need a quick summary of Plato's cave so that we may collect all of the pieces necessary to understand Ellison's opaque rendering of Western thought, its implications for understanding opacity, black thought and thinking. In Plato's Cave, Socrates posits a heuristic, an allegory, to Glaucon concerning a group of cave dwellers who are chained to the walls by their neck and legs and only come to know things—objects, sounds, and signs—through the shadows and echoes played upon the wall they are bound to face. Because they cannot turn around, Plato posits that these cave dwellers do not see the objects, a metonymic stand-in for reality, as they are but as these objects' shadows appear; and, if they hear sounds when the shadows of these objects appear on the wall, they would assume the shadows spoke rather than the men who carried the objects in front of the fire. Plato asserts "To them [the cave dwellers] the truth would be

nothing but the shadows of images," mere representations read as the thing itself. In *The Allegory*, the pedagogue, also known as the philosopher or the benevolent politician, is the cave dweller who is forced to reject the prison-house of sight, forced to glimpse the fire of that makes the shadows, forced to confront the discomfort of the light, the discomfort of not knowing the names of the objects as they are as opposed to what he or she thought them to be when chained to the wall of the cave. The pedagogue/philosopher is the individual not merely forced to glimpse the fire but is made to climb out of the cave altogether and glimpse the sun, the first fire, and come back to the cave, to the darkness, and dwell with those that have never left, instructing them on the realities that they have heretofore never seen. For Socrates, the man or woman who glimpses the sun, which is a symbolic representation of coming into enlightenment, is the one who must govern and instruct. DuBois's allegory "Of the Coming of John" and even DuBois's own much-maligned (and rightfully so) notion of the Talented Tenth exhibit this sort of thinking—a type of theorizing and instructing from above. John, like DuBois himself in "Of the Meaning of Progress," seeks to bring the vision of the Sun and its attendant enlightenments back to Altamaha. However, that journey, much like many scholars of color's journey of bringing the fire down to the homes and hovels of their youth, always ends in disaster. In the case of John, it ends in tragedy of errors; he is rejected by his community because of his inability to communicate with them or understand how to add on to the pedagogies that already existed in the community. And shortly after, John stumbles upon his sister being raped by his white doppelganger and former boyhood playmate, who he then proceeds to kill. While this melodramatic and gratuitous moment in the narrative certainly corroborates Claudia Tate's analysis of DuBois conflating black women's sexuality with black male liberation or lack thereof in *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race*, this moment also

articulates the inadequacy of a Socratic and Western notion of enlightenment and pedagogy. Quite simply, coming from on-high to speak to the low creates a hierarchical understanding of knowledge production and falsely assumes that the knowledge being produced inside of the cave is inadequate, unfit, and disorderly. Theorizing from the folk or from below is nothing new. Robin D.G. Kelley in "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Folk," Stuart Hall's "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," Amiri Baraka's *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, Albert Murray's *The Omni-Americans*, Addison Gayle's edited volume *The Black Aesthetic*, and even Langston Hughes's short essay in *The Nation* back in 1926, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain, perform this type of theorizing. However, all but Hughes grapple with the abject and abjection as a site of knowledge that does not need recovery or reconnaissance or translation. Kelley, Hall, Baraka, Murray, Gayle, and many others purify and repackage folk culture phenomenon in the garb of the Academic, render folk aesthetics and idioms so that they might be a bit more transparent for both popular and academic audiences. It becomes a type of anthropological and aesthetic reconnaissance mission, a making orderly of the disorder. But this making transparent is a type of prettying and gussying up, participating in what Glissant warned against—Western notions of knowing which are ultimately interested in reducing ideas or peoples to ingestible and digestible bits and bites.

And where am I in all of this, a black man reared in a Pentecostal Church, raised on reader-response exegetical criticism, a black man who is folk and rendering folk, a black man who comes from the same traditions and archives of terror? How does this book project enact and perform a similar reduction that I am critiquing in its mimesis, citation, and reiteration of scholarly discourse, scholarly investigation? Is there any escaping the ideological apparatuses of the Academy? Moreoever, is there any escaping the ideological apparatus of the state? Is this project trafficking in

the reducibility of blackness, trafficking in the fungibility of the black body? Is this project making absent, disappearing blackness through hypervisibility? Where is my body?

Am I above or below? Am I in the archive of abjection or do I sit coolly outside of the cave, the carnival barker shouting to others to come and stare at the freaks, the commodities who do not understand their own value. What signature of Marx do I replicate? What do I disavow in the avowing, in the reading, in the process of showing myself a fit scholar?

COUSIN LEROI

I'm back, Cousin.

SQUIRE REEVES

What have you done with Dr. Bledsoe, Leroi?

COUSIN LEROI

Don't worry about it. Let's just say he's in his tower, a bit Rapunzel-like. Keep playing.

SQUIRE REEVES

But it's hard to play, right now. I feel like I got an ear in my mouth and a schizophrenia singing inside of me.

COUSIN LEROI

Why, Cousin?

SQUIRE REEVES

I'm doing what I didn't want to do. I'm just replicating the same ol' shit.

COUSIN LEROI

Same 'ol, same 'ol, huh?

SQUIRE REEVES

Just call me SAMO© without the spray can: "Jimmy Best/On his back/To the suckerpunch/of his childhood files."[33]

COUSIN LEROI

"Life for me ain't been no crystal stair." Who said that Cousin?[34]

SQUIRE REEVES

Hughes. Langston Hughes

COUSIN LEROI

Climb, Cousin. Climb.

SQUIRE REEVES

Cousin, but I want to descend.

COUSIN LEROI

Then get down, brother, get down. Remember, what mask you got on. Play with the dark like you said. Play along with the dark.

SQUIRE REEVES

How do you play along with the dark—in scholarship?

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[33] "SAMO©" and "Jimmy Best / On his back / To the suckerpunch / of his childhood files" was a graffiti tag on walls all over lower Manhattan during the late 1970s. Jean-Michel Basquiat was the writer. Upon researching the proper MLA documentation, I found that there was none for graffiti. This lack of proper documentation for graffiti texts elucidates the inadequacy of the Academy to account for the texts, articulations, and performances that are born out of the ontology and epistemology of objects. Discussing this particular oversight or absence would require another chapter. But suffice it to say, this moment is exactly why this project must be written. These oversights must be accounted for, made visible.

[34] See Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son" in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 261.

COUSIN LEROI

What instrument you got?

SQUIRE REEVES

My mind.

COUSIN LEROI

What else you got?

SQUIRE REEVES

These words.

COUSIN LEROI

Play on, Player, play.

SQUIRE REEVES

But what about?

COUSIN LEROI

Play, player, play.

SQUIRE REEVES

Cousin?

COUSIN LEROI

Play, Player, play.

SQUIRE REEVES

Okay, Cousin, okay.

(*Address the audience directly)*

I will attempt to play along with Ellison. I will not read Ellison though what may follow may appear to be a reading. I will perform what Moten calls an "*a*calculation of a function" whose upper limit is reading toward a theory of the object and the lower limit is a transcription/reading of Ellison's prologue (45). This acalculation begins with reveling in the abjection of the cave, participating and listening to the theory-making of the cave dwellers, an alternative discourse of the scholarly.

Unlike Plato's cave, in Ellison's cave (and concomitantly Armstrong's cave) one must descend rather than ascend to achieve enlightenment; one must hear the "old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco" and descend lower still to hear "a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body" (9). Unlike Plato's Cave, enlightenment comes from the dark, from the low rather than the high, from those made abject and those that embrace that abjection. What is covered, what is dark, what is invisible produces the knowledge, pedagogy, and philosophy of the black citizen-object. Ellison's subversion of classical rhetorical and philosophical renderings of transcendence does not end merely in this inversion and subversion, a playing out of a Saussurian structuralism. The denizens of the cave, those that would be trapped there, are not merely slaves chained to a wall who are in need of philosopher-savior to crawl back into the darkness with the balm of enlightenment; no, quite the opposite. The theory, the pedagogy comes from the inside, from the darkness, from what Moten would call the break, the invagination. The 'pleading ivory girl' and the old woman singing the spiritual theorize, produce knowledges very similar to the way in which Moten theorizes Aunt Hester's shriek. They announce their own theory of value outside and contradictory to the theory of value they are being grafted into, forced into. The pleading of

the girl rebuffs and resists the value that the slave owners ascribe to her body; her pleading offers a transgressive reading and protest to the incorporation of her body into the means and modes of production that only seek her disappearance through the mastering of her flesh; the old woman singing a spiritual "as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco" signals a musical inhabitation of affect, a theory of sorts, one that is rigorous, complicated, and robust and captures a world-weariness that disappears in the singing which is a type of resistance. But they do not attend to the theorizing with pad and pen but with the body. The body becomes the object which becomes the book of the theorization. This book of the body which is also a book of theorization prefigures and anticipates Elaine Scarry's work on the body and pain and Luce Iragary's feminist manifesto "When Our Lips Speak Together," which defamiliarize language theory and philosophy by offering a women's bodies as intellectual stutters. Through attending to sound of the shriek and moan, the 'pleading ivory girl' and the old woman singing the spiritual (and concomitantly Ellison) offers a theory of themselves that resists appropriation and knowability. Through what appears to be merely guttural response to their being made base, they make something else of the abjection while not rejecting it outright. As Barbara Christian notes, black folks have always theorized but not always with the grammars and technologies that are recognized within The Academy[35]. Often, the theorization done through the black body gets misrecognized, misheard, and misinterpreted as banal and even vulgar in the Academy, but this misrecognition occurs because of the desire to render black intelligence transparent; the desire to attach the aesthetics, intelligence, and philosophy of the black citizen-object to the universal human project of the Enlightenment. But I ask again: what if we don't? What if we extend democracy to black citizen-objects as such? This theorization can take the

[35] See Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory" (*Feminist Studies* 14.1 (1988)), 68.

form of gossip or moaning or shrieking or singing or sermonizing as it does in the text of *Invisible Man*. The sermon in the cave, what comes after hearing the girl pleading for her life in front of slave owners, articulates the "text" or ontological philosophy of the black citizen-object, the pedagogy that the narrator has been searching for.

It is an ironic and comedic moment that the sermon in the cave concerns 'the blackness of blackness'—a tautology, a signifyin(g) on and symbolic rendering of the actual situation of dwelling in a cave as well as an articulation of the ontology of the black citizen-object. And what is even more ironic and subversive is that the minister calls it a text, something oral, improvised, and disappearing even as it occurs, which contradicts a Western notion of text—something fixed, immovable, dead. What is doubly or even triply ironic is that text of the sermon is only made visible through its re-presentation in Ellison's novel. The text is itself a reappearance based upon a disappearance, a visibility based upon invisibility or in the words of the preacher or caller in *Invisible Man*—'the blackness of blackness.' 'The blackness of blackness' is a visibility based upon a disappearance, a game of hide-and-go-seek that constantly dis- and re-orients what it means to be found, what it is to hide, what it is to see and hear—what is is. 'The blackness of blackness,' or at least Ellison's 'blackness of blackness,' seeks to record or transcribe the theory of shifting, the constant displacement of objects in a field, in a dream, in the alleged unified continuum of sight. Ellison understands that what has gotten black people into this situation of in/hyper/visibility is sight and the Enlightenment desire for transparency, and if one is to truly see a disappearance, one must not see but hear because hearing allows for opacities that vision cannot broker or traffic in. But one can't listen as one might listen to a philosopher or teacher or pedagogue. One must listen

with multiple ears; one must listen for multiple lines being played at the same time; one must listen to the way in which these lines overlap and even correct each other.

Ellison performs this type of seeing as listening in the call and response portion of the sermon. Much has been written on call and response. Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. BuBois, Amiri Baraka, Henry Louis Gates, Vijay Iyers, Meta DuEwa Jones, and a whole slew of writers, critics, visual artists, blues and jazz musicians, and poets have written about and critically embodied this black oral phenomenon, and I do not plan to rework this well-tilled soil[36]. However, what I am interested in playing a bit with are the philosophical implications of the notion of the changing same, riff and refrain as it relates to pedagogy and the response in the call and response dialectic. Another way of saying this (playing this) is to think about the critique, the re-articulation or reiteration with riff of the chorus or choir to the caller's original hailing. In the language of Jacques Derrida, it would be a manifestation of the innumerable ways in which a perfomative utterance can be cited and recited thus imparting a distance and deviation from its original context, thus predicting and anticipating a future that the original citation or hailing did not anticipate[37]. Such an example of this call and correction occurs at the beginning of the sermon on 'the blackness of blackness.' In the beginning of the sermon, the un-identified minister (another irony) begins his sermon like the King James Version of Genesis begins: "'In the beginning…'" (9). However, the choir or chorus or congregation (take your pick) calls back, affirming the initial performative

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[36] See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston, MA: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2003). See W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Publications, Inc., 1994). See Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*. See Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*. See Vijay Iyer, "Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Mealey, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia UP, 2004). See Meta DuEwa Jones, *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

[37] See Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context" in *Limited Inc.*, trans. Alan Bass (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988), 1-23.

utterance but correcting it or re-iterating the signature with difference. They respond: "'At the very start,…'" (9). The congregation (my choice) does not repeat back the same line. They alter and critique the original call, substituting one prepositional phrase that bespeaks to origin with another that speaks to motion. The reader is at once located (spatially, physically and figuratively) through the locution and illocutionary effect of the preacher and, concomitantly, catapulted into action, into motion (physical, historic, and epochal) through the response of the congregation. This simultaneity creates a perlocutionary and ontological effect akin to the dilemma in quantum physics of simultaneously locating the position of an electron and finding that same electron's acceleration or momentum in a molecular orbital. A brief aside is necessary here so that we are all on the same theoretical footing. In 1925 and 1926, Werner Heisenberg began debating physicists and quantum chemists like Erwin Shrödinger about the movement and position of atomic and subatomic particles. There were two theories bandied about at the time—the matrix theory and the wave theory. Heisenberg, a matrix theorist, proposed that one could not locate the position of an electron and electron's acceleration or momentum at the same time. This dilemma had nothing to do with the instruments or the technology used to measure these subatomic particles, but it was the matter itself that rebuked this precision. Quite simply, quantum matter, the wave nature of the matter, does not allow for it to be known, to be located, to be harnessed with absolute precision. But what might Heisenberg's uncertainty principle have to do with call and response in Ellison's *Invisible Man*? How is this little aside useful? As already established earlier, the ontology of blackness as expressed in the sermon is based upon a dis- and re-appearance, based in a visibility and concomitantly an invisibility, a knowing and then not-knowing. This type of relationship, one of precision and imprecision, one of knowing and not-knowing, one of visibility and invisibility of an

electron within a molecular orbital is similar to the locatability, the knowability, the in/visibility of (the ontology and epistemology) blackness and blackness as it is particularly expressed in the call and response of Ellison's preacher and congregation. This relationship I am creating between call and response and the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle isn't just a tidy little metaphor that works because of the dialectic nature of contradiction. No, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle works with this moment of call and response in *Invisible Man* because the sermon on the ontology of blackness is concerned with both location and motion. The congregation does not know what will be said beforehand; thus, the congregation's response to the sermon's call is based in improvisation, an acceleration of sorts, a "starting" that reaches back to the "beginning," in the language of quantum physics, offering a momentum to the electron (the sermon's) location. Thus, improvisation and the improvisatory nature of the response is based upon a phrase, which can be understood as a location, that is amended, corrected, re-iterated, re-signified through the motion of a response thereby changing or obscuring or, better yet, making its location opaque. And coordinately, it blurs the call and response into one unit, into a mass of tightly coordinated sound and speech that anticipates and prefigures itself. In fact, Ellison hints at the simultaneity of improvisation when he has his narrator declare "I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well" (9). The response isn't merely affirmation. It's an interruption that welcomes an alternative telling, an alternative gaze. But again, why does this matter? What is significant about an interruption? This type of interruption, the process of call and response theorizes an alternative to Western notions of authority, authenticity, and the alleged fixed-nature of intersectionality and identity. Call and response decenters the notion of an authority because even as the caller calls he can be corrected, critiqued in the response. Riffing on J.L. Austin's notion of the performative

utterance, the collective's return utterance is required for the speech act to be felicitious[38]. The call and response democratizes authority through the opacity of the many. Even as the voices meld into a collective "preach it," the caller (minister) can only proceed with the community's approval. Thus, the history, the ontology, the epistemology of the community is constantly being critiqued and "re-written" as it is being articulated.

This simultaneity is best elucidated in the section of the sermon when the preacher announces: "*Now black is….*," and the congregation responds "*Bloody…*" Not hearing what he thought to be the proper response, he reiterates his previous call with difference and says again: "*I said black is…*," for which the congregation respond, "*Preach it, brother…*" That "preach it, brother" propels the preacher to respond, "*…an' black ain't…*" Ellison's use of ellipsis supports my position that the call of the preacher is an ongoing text that can only be completed or co-written with the congregation. The ellipses act as a bridge, an opaque connector between the call and response. However, this bridge, this "…" is not straight bridge or a bridge of equivalence. Its connection is opaque, unclear, but productively so. The ellipses queer equivalence through performing uncertainty, performing anticipation, incompleteness[39]. They reach back even as they announce an unknown future. The ellipses anticipate a presence in an absence, metonymically produce a visibility even as an invisibility is also present. As Brent Hayes Edwards argues concerning Louis Armstrong's excessive use of ellipses in "Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat," they perform improvisationally, affectively[40]. They articulate a three-dimensional field of possibility. In the case of the preacher of *Invisible Man*, it produces an unexpected response. However, the response re-

[38] See J.L. Austin.

[39] Here, I am in conversation with Jennifer DeVere Brody's analysis of the visual and sonic significance of the ellipses in *Invisible Man*. See Jennifer DeVere Brody, *Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008).

[40] See Brent Hayes Edwards, "Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat" (*Critical Inquiry* 28 (2002)), 618-649.

fashions the call. Black is now "bloody" rather than "ain't." The response of "bloody" articulates a corporeality—one that both remonstrates the invisibility of blackness (i.e. black people are made of blood) and testifies to the archive of terror, the abject history of black objects (i.e. the history of blackness is bloody). However, the minister does not feel satisfied in this response, or better yet, the preacher desires to respond to this call. This type of toggling back and forth, this exchange of positions—the caller becoming the responder and the responder becoming the caller—exemplifies not only the simultaneity of presence and absence, but it also exemplifies an interruption of authority and what is authoritative. And, this interruption enacts the ontological slipperiness of identity. The caller and responder, the preacher and the congregation swapping roles, performs critique and meta-critique of critics like Walter Benn Michael who purport that intersectionality is an essentializing theoretical scholarly practice. As this call and response moment in *Invisible Man* elucidates, there is no such thing as a stable identity. The caller and the responder constantly swap charges, rolls, and ontologies. This swapping creates a checks and balance system between individual ambition and group desire. The congregation, through its collective response, required the preacher to cede the position of caller; yet, there is still room for the preacher to revise his call. His revision draws a different response from the congregation. Their response, "preach it," offers him a space to finish the revision. "Preach it" acts as a charge, an affirmation that the congregation desires to hear what comes next. And what comes next is "…an' black ain't…"(9). And the congregation responds "Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!" (9).

Before we continue with this line of analysis, it would be helpful to gather up all of our fragments in one place. Black "is" "bloody" "Red" and "ain't." I gather these fragments in this manner, making a list of them, because even as the list denotes a type of instability or destabilizing

of ontology, it also shows opaque relationships in the destabilization. Black "is," and black "ain't." Black "is…bloody," and black is also "red." The relationship between black is and black ain't is a dialectical one, one that speaks to the appearance and disappearance of blackness, the visibility and invisibility of the ontologies, histories, and culture of black citizen-objects in America. And the relationship between black is bloody and black is red is one of the performing in / visibility versus describing in /visibility. However, even as black toggles back and forth between these poles they exist within a field of opaque relation. The relation is that the bloody of blackness metonymically and metaphorically renames and re-inscribes the is-ness of blackness and vice versa. And the redness of blackness signifies the ain't of blackness and vice versa. Blackness becomes specific and situated and, concomitantly, amorphous, blurred, and fragmented. Blackness is disappearing and reappearing, producing absences and presences at once. This type of opaque there-ness and nowhere-ness, is-ness and ain't-ness articulate the contingent ontology of blackness. Throughout the rest of the sermon, blackness expresses polar opposites; "black will git you," and "black won't." Black "do," and black "don't." "Black will make you…" (10). "…or black will unmake you." And at this moment is where the sermon shifts—at the making and unmaking of the black citizen-object—and rightfully so. This moment—the making and unmaking of blackness—is the performance that we have witnessed in this soup of shifting ontologies, in the calling and responding, in the unmooring and re-establishing of identity. The making and unmaking of blackness, which could also be understood as the making and unmaking of subjectivity, the making and unmaking of black freedom, is what must be linguistically and thus sonically and visually performed. However, the making and unmaking of blackness requires embracing the ain't, won't, and don't of blackness. What blackness is not participates in the making of blackness as much as what it is. The abjection of

blackness, the archive of terror, must speak as vociferously, eloquently, and raggedly as triumphant moments of black history. Nothing can be hidden, closeted, or sequestered.

It is at this moment in the dreamscape that the narrator is expelled from the space of the sermon. To harken back to Plato's Cave, he must go deeper into the cave. There are more pedagogues and philosophers for him to meet. There's more abjection to experience, witness, re-member, and re-count. It is here, at his expulsion, that the narrator meets a woman who is a former slave and has had several sons by her master. The narrator is flummoxed by this admission. He cannot understand why she is not bitter or angry or in need of revenge. Her response is one that embraces abjection, ambivalence, the impurity of the hybrid as potential and political and epistemological possibility. She offers: "*He gave me several sons*,…and *because I loved my sons I learned to love their father though I hated him too*." This woman produces for the narrator an opaque relationship that is similar to the ellipses. Her continuum of hate and love overlap and intersect. At once, she hates her master, but she also loves him because of her sons, a product or emanation of their congress. Her sons are the symbolic, actual, and metonymic response to the call of abjection, to the archive of terror. The birth of her sons produces both a presencing of blackness and an absencing of blackness. Their corporeality is an opaque weave of this woman's infelicitous union and the offspring of it which she now loves. Her sons compel her, like the ellipses, too look backward toward the act of their conception and forward toward her motherhood. The mother's ambivalence, which the unnamed narrator also admits to trafficking in, is abjection par excellence. And the ambivalence manifests through the moan. Here again, the moan appears as a type of surreal, folk theorizing; as mentioned in Chapter 2, the moan theorizes a future that razes, troubles, subverts, and challenges the Enlightenment quest for humanity. The moan articulates the

opacity of ambivalence through its (non)specificity. The (non)specificity of the moan defies iteration and breaks from all linguistic chains. It floats free of the overdetermination of language and meaning.

The mother's moan prefigures, predicts, and anticipates her eventual confession: that what she loves most is freedom. And this freedom can be only be achieved through loving. However, her version of love is not one that contains satin pillows, red hearts, and flowers. The flowers of this love have thorns and thistles. After the narrator posits that freedom could possibly be achieved through hating, she answers: "*Naw, son, it's in loving. I loved him and give him the poison and he withered away like a frost-bit apple. Them boys woulda tore him to pieces with they homemade knives*" (11). This love, which requires her to poison her master, is not the clean-cut love of romantics, but it is an opaque love, something akin to the revolutionary suicide of Africans throwing themselves into the Atlantic on their way to America. In other words, the love for her master is expressed through what might be perceived as a contradictory action—murder. Disentangling murder from a moral code wherein acts of violence are always understood as malevolent, the mother murdering her master subverts static notions of expressing love. The murdering of her master is an act of self-love. This murder is also another presence made through an absence. Through the killing of her master, which is a type of disappearance or absence, the mother is able to achieve her freedom or achieve something akin to freedom. Her master's death creates the space and opportunity for her agency.

However, as Angela Davis posits in her lectures on liberation and Frederick Douglass and Jennifer Devere Brodie argues in *Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play*, freedom is a complex weave of appearances and disappearances, apprehensions and misapprehensions, understanding and

misunderstandings[41]. As the moaning mother of *Invisible Man* notes: "*It's [freedom] all mixed up. First, I think it's one thing, then I think it's another. It gits my head to spinning. I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head. But it's a hard job, son"* (11). Freedom requires constant revision. As the moaning mother states, freedom's amorphous, a dizzying endeavor. Freedom is also a linguistic act—"*I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head"* (11). This theorization by the moaning mother elucidates the notion that freedom is speech-act, a performative utterance (i.e. the moaning enacts freedom). And moreover, freedom or enacting freedom is learning how to control, articulate, and negotiate the wide world of signs, how to reconfigure, revise, and re-fashion the signifiers. For the moaning mother, the performance of her opaque freedom is expressed in the moan. The moaning is sonic performance of a corporeal and ontological desire. Moaning produces what is not yet visible, what is apprehended through desire but not yet visible. Moaning is an ellipses placed between a near-past and a near-future. The moan articulates in the in-articulatable, what sits outside the grammars and technologies of received language. The moan does not participate in the citational chain of the human because it's interested in producing a future that was not accounted for in the human endeavor of language. The moan…the moan razes the human, obliterates the knowable. The moan articulates the ontology of the black citizen-object.

COUSIN LEROI

That's it, Cousin. That's it. Moan, Cousin. Moan.

[41] See Angela Davis, "First Lecture on Liberation," in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2010).

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Chapter 4: In the Break: Aporia, Doubt, and Metaphysical Indeterminacy in the Poetry of Terrance Hayes and Jericho Brown, Twenty-First Century (Black) Poetics

"…Tropes are not something that can be added or subtracted from language at will; they are its truest nature." De Man quoting Nietzsche, "Rhetoric of Tropes (Nietzsche)"

"What is truth? A moving army of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms, in short a summa of human relationships that are being poetically and rhetorically sublimated, transposed, beautified until, after long repeated use, a people considers them as solid, canonical, and unavoidable. Truths are illusions whose illusionary nature has been forgotten, metaphors that have been used up and have lost their imprint and that now operate as mere metal, no longer as coins." De Man quoting Nietzsche, "Rhetoric of Tropes (Nietzsche)"

"a bird sweeps from one branch to another, the indistinct shadows life off the crumpled weeds, smoke rises from the gravel quarry—all this is metonymy." Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*

In 1872, Nietzsche published *Philosphenbuch*, announcing that language was tropological, a series of metaphors that have forgotten the lie that ushered them into existence, and because of their forgotten birth preen about as truth mistaking their instability for stability. One hundred years later, in 1980, Lyn Hejinian made the same declaration in her poetic autobiography *My Life*, a work that at once engages the poetic, the fictive, and the personal in a genre-busting book in which the random supersedes and subverts meaning. Both Nietzsche's philosophical assertion and Hejinian's poetic assertion, despite their one hundred year gap, produce the contemporary moment of the contemporary poem. Unlike Gertrude Stein's poems like "Susie Asado" and "Tender Buttons," poems that explore meaning-making through notions of the unconscious as advanced by American psychologist William James and French philosopher Henri Bergson, Hejinian's *My Life* sought to obliterate the obsession with meaning in poetry much in the way Nietzsche's challenging of metaphysical ideas of truth and subjectivity served to loosen philosophy's strangle-hold on notions

of truth. This event, the publication of *My Life*, which became not only a scandal but also a moment of seduction in the postmodern, poetry world, toppled the notion of the individuated self and the authentic poetic voice. Jahan Ramazani, in his introduction to *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, cites Hejinian's text as one of the texts that usher in the poetics of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E (Language) poets. Ramazani writes "[i]n their [language poets] writing, they enact the post-structuralist view that the coherent self is an ideological illusion" (lxii). For Language poets, the self only arises from language, and even as the self arises, it is not one self that arises but multiple selves. Language poets might flip the phrase self-expression to expressive selves. Further on in the same paragraph, Ramazani continues: "the linear or narrative flow of language needs to be interrupted, even garbled, to reveal its multiple vectors, its hidden multiplicity, fractures, and instability" (lxii). Language poets also embraced philosophical texts that deconstructed the linguistic events of language and, often, incorporated the language of philosophy and its subsequent ideas into the text. This interrogation of language, particularly in its performative, transgressive and iterable manifestations became not only the hallmark of Language poetry but a hallmark of contemporary poetry in general. Investigating the slippages, stutters, gaps in language, intention and meaning, meta-critically discussing the event of the poem as the poem occurs, challenging referentiality and the supremacy of the referent to name, to call itself and others into being, is the mode du jour. Now, poets tear apart artifice and deconstruct the text from the inside out, elucidating and examining the failure of form as they inhabit the form. Two such poets that engage in this type of making are Terrance Hayes and Jericho Brown. Hayes and Brown borrow, riff, and speak back to and against the poetics of the Language Movement in the construction of their own poems.

However, these poets have also been affected by another poetry movement, one that critiqued received, poetic language, literary tradition, and notions of a universal, poetic self—the Black Arts Movement. The Black Arts Movement poets declared war on the literary establishment and demanded that poems must have an aesthetic efficacy as well as a political one. As Amiri Baraka, one of the scions of the Black Arts Movement and its subsequent rhetoric, declared in "Black Art," a seminal poem of the Black Arts Movement, "Poems are bullshit unless they are/ teeth or trees…/Setting fire and death to/ whities' ass/" and then later in the poem, Baraka writes:

> Poem scream poison gas on beasts in green berets
> Clean out the world for virtue and love,
> Let there be no love poems written
> until love can exist freely and
> cleanly. Let Black people understand
> that they are the lovers and the sons
> of warriors and sons
> of warriors Are poems & poets &
> all the loveliness here in the world
>
> We want a black poem. And a
> Black World.
> Let the world be a Black Poem
> and Let All Black People Speak This Poem
> Silently
> or LOUD (ll. 41-55)

And in "The Myth of a "Negro Literature," Baraka extends this call for a certain type of black poem, declaring that black poets would be better off listening to 'Bessie Smith sing *Gimme A Pigfoot'* and modeling their creative work off of jazz and blues rather than being "content to imperfectly imitate the bad poetry of the ruined minds of Europe" and what Baraka calls the "recognizable tradition," the bourgeoisie poetry of the Academy (113). Baraka separated himself from writers like Robert

Hayden and James Baldwin because he felt these writers aped the white literary establishment rather than offering authentic black language, orality, and epistemological and ontological truths in their creative renderings of black life. Ultimately, the Black Arts Movement introduced an unbridled rage and distrust for language—language that reified white power structures, language that further submerged blacks into nonbeing, language that excluded black, urban expressivity. While contemporary poets like Hayes and Brown borrow the Black Arts Movements imperative to center black expressive culture, history, and experience in their poems, they do so with a critical eye, what bell hooks might call an oppositional gaze, making sure not to reify the phallogocentric thought, masculinist narratives, and homophobic rhetoric that often accompanied the rhetoric of the Black Arts Movement.

It is in this break, this linguistic liminal zone that Hayes and Brown exist. It is this break, a coalescing of the L=A=N=G poetry's philosophical and linguistic concerns of a unified self with the Black Arts Movement's distrust for the "recognizable tradition," that produces not only the linguistic and rhetorical undergirding of these poet's work, but it also produces the rhetorical situation of aporia. Aporia is defined as true or feigned doubt. Aporia first appears in a work of Plato's called *Meno*. In *Meno*, Meno, the interlocutor, makes claims that Socrates helps to show have truth value and, at the same time, do not have truth value. The moment in which a claim is both true and not true is the moment of aporia. Scholarly conversation around the trope lay dormant until the early 1990s. In 1992, Jacques Derrida publishes *Aporias* and transforms the trope into a philosophical tool that allows him to discuss metaphysical indeterminacies such as: can one truly mourn the death of another since the other has become part of the mourner. Another metaphysical indeterminacy Derrida discusses is can one truly give a gift. However, I am using aporia in this

chapter as a means of discussing linguistic and socio-political indeterminacies and the subsequent anxieties enacted in the poems of Terrance Hayes and Jericho Brown. I am arguing that Hayes and Brown employ aporetic discourse as a means of subverting and pointing to the constructed-ness of creating a text that must straddle multiple traditions and simultaneously unveil the artifice of making. These poets are also responding to critical schools and scholarly criticism that sought to exclude their heteroglossic forms of expressivity (read New Criticism, Formalism, New Formalism, and even the Black Arts Movement). The multiple-tongued-ness of their poems coupled with the aporetic discourse is not merely a rant or tantrum. Instead, their laying bear the artifice of textual constructed-ness, of race, of sexuality, of rhetoric is an attempt at expanding what sits inside a black poem and what black poetics encompasses as well as what American poetics is and can be. Moreover, these poets are interested in moving their poems and black poetics away from the grand narratives of black nationalism and identity politics and instead move black poetics toward understanding race, blackness in particular, as part of the materials of poetry, as much a part of the processing of making a poem as metaphor, the line, and Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Through the self-conscious interrogation of the materials of poetry, they establish an authorial intent and control that has political efficacy as well as aesthetic rigor. Making the reader aware of their verse-making serves the political and aesthetic function of creating authorial visibility as a means of combating black "non-being"[42] and the erasure of the author that certain forms of scholarship position as the correct way of reading, of seeing. In other words, Hayes and Brown want you to know that their personas are young, gifted, black, and well-read. This is

[42] I borrow the term non-being from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks.* In *Black Skin, White Mask*, Fanon argues that black men live in a zone of non-being, a zone of non-agency and invisibility because of race. However, this zone of non-being is not a prison sentence. It is a zone of liberatory possibility as well. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skink White Masks,* trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), xii.

not a reduction but quite the opposite. These poets want the reader to be aware that they can line break about fried chicken, Walter Benjamin, Borges, and Big Momma Thornton all while writing in the mood of Frank O'Hara. What these poets seem interested in doing is revising and re-envisioning what it means to read and to be read.

In fact, Terrance Hayes, touted as a 'true American voice of the post-Civil Rights era' by poets like Elizabeth Alexander, Mary Karr, John Ashbery, and Cornelius Eady, begins his third book, *Wind In A Box*, with an explosion of linguistic and historical signifying that riffs upon black nationalist ideology of the 1960s and scholarship on identity politics, ironically engages scholarly performance and posturing, and critiques bourgeoisie, middle-class mannerliness. In "Woofer (When I Consider the African-American), Hayes writes:

> "When I consider the much discussed dilemma
> of the African-American, I think not of the diasporic
> middle passing, unchained, juke, jock, and jiving
> sons and daughters of what sleek dashikied poets
> and tether fisted Nationalists commonly call Mother
> Africa, but of an ex-girlfriend who was the child
> of a black-skinned Ghanian beauty and Jewish-
> American, globetrotting ethnomusicologist" (ll. 1-8, 3).

Immediately noticed is the persona's rhetoricity, the performance of bombast speechification as evinced in the subordinate clause "[w]hen I consider the much discussed dilemma/ of the African-American" (3). The performance of argumentation is done sarcastically, some might say ironically, and in that sarcastic moment of poking fun at antiquated ideas of argumentation, it makes the audience aware of the constructed-ness of argument and the apparatus of argumentation, the constructed-ness of a text. It also defamiliarizes the familiarity of the poetic voice, of the lyric utterance. The reader or listener does not associate that particular style of phrase-making with

contemporary poetry. The phrasing, the performance beckons back to a type of orality one might associate with Martin Luther King or Frederick Douglass—not a persona or poet that bumps Kool Keith or Outkast from his Pioneer speakers. This defamiliarization serves the purpose of putting the audience on notice; this is neither your grandfather's lyric nor his black housekeeper's protest poem.

The poem's defamiliarizing does not end in its tone. Slippages of meaning, signification, re-signification and subversion also occur tropologically in the form of anthimeria. Hayes changing the noun, Middle Passage, to an adjective, middle passing, employs anthimeria, the changing of a word from one form of speech to another, and this change subverts the reader's expectation. This jolt, which is more like a rupture, removes the term 'Middle Passage' from the realm of the historical and the sacred and (re)makes the term in its adjectival form secular, common, something that can be played with, punned on and against, something that is open and indeterminate in meaning. This tropological punning, this linguistic switcheroo functions aporetically. What does middle passing mean? Is Hayes referring and riffing upon the cultural phenomenon of racial passing—pretending to be white or not black in order to infiltrate white institutions? Or is Hayes arguing something about time, space, and the evolution of Black American-ness in relationship to slavery and the Middle Passage? Is Hayes, or more so the persona in the poem, asking if black folks in America are passing for black folks of another time and era? The introduction of the anthimeria is to open-up these questions, open up these liminal areas in which doubt and indeterminacy is the stable ground upon which one might locate one's footing, one's reading.

However, it does seem that Hayes and this poem asks us to jettison older ideas of African-American identity and identity politics, or at the very least, consider them in conversation with

more nuanced ideas of blackness. Let us go back to the aforementioned quote and read it again, but this time, let's read it for what it is articulating and what it supposedly is not articulating:

> "When I consider the much discussed dilemma
> of the African-American, I think not of the diasporic
> middle passing, unchained, juke, jock, and jiving
> sons and daughters of what sleek dashikied poets
> and tether fisted Nationalists commonly call Mother
> Africa, but of an ex-girlfriend who was the child
> of a black-skinned Ghanaian beauty and Jewish-
> American, globe-trotting ethnomusicologist" (ll. 1-8, 3).

In the construction of the opening sentence, Hayes' persona announces that in his conception of the African-American he does not think of the off-spring Black Nationalist but instead thinks of the African-American in terms of a bi-racial ex-girlfriend, "the child of a black-skinned Ghanaian beauty and Jewish-/American, globe-trotting ethnomusicologist" (3). However, in his denial of what he is not thinking of, he reproduces it—which is a fruitful contradiction and somewhat scandalous. It's like saying the n-word instead of nigger in a conversation. In the reproduction of the slur in truncated form, I, the listener, is responsible for the offense as opposed to the speaker. I say the word in my head and thus I'm the one who "said it," produced the offense. Similarly, Hayes reproduces the scandal, the spectacle without having to take responsibility for it. Here, I am reading Hayes's denial of what the African-American is not much in the way that poet and scholar Fred Moten reads Saidiya Hartman's refusal to reproduce Frederick Douglass's vivid recounting of Aunt Hester's beating in Hartman's seminal work on pleasure, enjoyment, and the pained black body, *Scenes of Subjection.* Hartman refuses to reproduce the beating because she wants to guard against reproducing the spectacle and the subsequent pleasure of indignation that both a modern reader would feel as well as the sympathetic reader of Douglass's time. Hartman asserts

that in the feeling of repugnance, the pained, mutilated black body is still being manipulated, coerced, and employed for the purpose of providing the reader with enjoyment—even if that enjoyment is repugnance. In *In the Break*, Moten critiques Hartman's lack of reproduction as itself a citation, and in so doing she points to the disappearing act of reproduction. Moten writes:

> "It's the ongoing repression of the primal scene of subjection that one wants to guard against and linger in. Douglass passes on a repression that Hartman's critical suppression extends. Such transfer demands that one ask if every recitation is a repression and if every reproduction of a performance is its disappearance. Douglass and Hartman confront us with the fact that the conjunction of reproduction and disappearance is performance's condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production" (Moten 5).

If Moten is correct, that every reproduction of a performance also produces its disappearance, then in Hayes reproducing what he does not think of when thinking of the African-American, he helps to disappear this older iteration of black identity and makes possible the creation of a new performance of blackness. In Hayes pointing to a type of black identity, a type of black expressivity, he would like to jettison, he must "confront" it; in other words he must go to and through these more antiquated, stayed forms of black, radical aesthetics and subjectivity to produce and perform a more radical, nuanced notion blackness—in this case, a black American-ness that is biracial (African and Jewish), betwixt and between. However, Hayes makes his reader exist in this break, in this space of metaphysical indeterminacy. This rupture and the middle-passing sons and daughters of Black Nationalists must accompany converse, debate, and perform alongside Hayes' possibility and performances of black identity. Quite simply, the possibility of what Hayes believes to be an African-American is contingent upon the reproduction and the disappearance of

what he believes the African-American is not; they must co-perform. Hayes achieves the disappearance of the tried and true Black Nationalist subjectivity by entering into narrative and lyric moments that chronicles his relationship with the young woman as opposed to deliberating over and meditating upon ideological questions concerning race.

The young woman's biraciality and the fact that one of her parents is African and the other Jewish are not arbitrary. Hayes destabilizes and defamiliarizes both the "African" and the "American" in the term African-American. Normally, when one thinks of African-American, one thinks of a black American whose ancestors are from South Carolina, Mississippi, Detroit, or California, ancestors who experienced the Middle Passage and Jim Crow. In Hayes pointing to the women's African ancestry, an ancestry that has been differently oppressed (imperialism and colonialism rather than the Middle Passage and slavery, King Leopold rather King Cotton), the reader must contend with the inadequacy of naming, the inadequacy of racial markings. This move by Hayes should not be read as petitioning for a post-racial position on race. Instead, it should be read as one that deconstructs the linguistic event, the performance of the term African-American for the purpose of offering up more possibility. Hayes asks the reader to hold the term in question, to doubt its fixity not its efficacy.

Doubt, aporia arises more explicitly later in the poem, as Hayes' persona readopts his ironic, oratorical posturing. Hayes writes:

> "…but when I consider the African-American
> I think not tek nines of my generation deployed
> by madness or that we were assigned some lousy fate
> when God prescribed job titles at the beginning of Time
> or that we were too dumb to run the other way
> when we saw the wide white sails of the ships

since given the absurd history of the world, everyone
is a descendant of slaves (which makes me wonder
if outrunning your captors is not the real meaning of Race?)
I think of the girl's bark colored, bi-continental nipples
when I consider the African-American.
I think of a string of people connected one to another
and including the two of us there in the basement
linked by a hyphen filled with blood;
linked by a blood-filled baton in one great historical relay (ll. 43-57, 4).

Here again, Hayes makes us work with and through stereotypical and received notions of black behavior as signaled in the phrase "the tek nines of my generation;" however, what he offers as what he considers as a different type of African-American-ness—phallic imagery in the form of "a blood-filled baton" and "a hyphen filled with blood"—is much less progressive than what he offered earlier in the poem. In many ways, it reifies the phallogocentric discourse of the Black Arts Movement and affirms the notion that black liberation is tied to the heterosexual black man's virility. Despite this misstep, Hayes still provides a bit of aporia that opens up possibilities in term of race with his parenthetical aside. Whether the doubt, the wonderment Hayes expresses is feigned or true is of little significance in this aporetic operation. When Hayes wonders "if outrunning your captors is not the real meaning of race," Hayes radically razes the stable ground by which the reader thought they understood race. Has this been the meaning of race all along? Another way of reading his question is ars-poetically or linguistically. Is one's ability to be raced or race-less dependent upon one's ability to avoid the trappings of language? As Hayes notes, race is not some lousy fate destined by God. Instead, race and racial definition is more about controlling the signs, signifiers, and what is signified. Throughout "Woofer (When I Consider The African-American)," Hayes performs a type of subversive iteration that is akin to Butler's analysis of the re-signification of hate speech and

homophobic slurs. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler analyzes the recuperation of the word queer and the ritual chain of signification; she writes:

> "the reevaluation of terms such as "queer" suggest that speech can be "returned" to its speaker in a different form, that it can be cited against its originary purposes, and then perform a reversal of effects. More generally, then, this suggests that the changeable power of such terms marks a kind of discursive performativity that is not a discrete series of speech acts, but a ritual chain of resignification whose origin and end remain unfixed and unfixable" (Butler 14).

Despite Hayes phallic-centered imagery, he echoes Butler's notion of signification and subversive citationality. Signifying—subverting the prior context, re-envisioning the originary purpose of a sign, in Hayes case the sign of race—is simply about entering into the great chain of meaning. In Hayes offering up this lyric, he speaks back to Baraka, the Black Arts Movement, and older, antiquated notions of race that do not properly contextualize his conception of the African-American. Hayes removes black identity from the trappings of victimhood and transposes it into the place of linguistic event, one in which there is no predetermined outcome, no predetermined end. Because of this subversion, the reader comes to understand race as a type of performativity; that race is a performance constantly in flux. In this linguistic and ideational flux, what Moten would call "the break," Hayes rearticulates the visibility of the black body. In "Woofer," the black body is one that participates in love and love-making as opposed to one that, to use the colloquialism, is popping caps in cop's ass or brandishing a tek nine. The black body is relocated and re-articulated as a site of pleasure rather than the stereotypical site of fear. I would also argue that that black body Hayes rearticulates is not the hypersexualized black body that Hortense Spillers critiques in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book."—the black body that is always

already having sex—but it is a black body that enjoys its corporeality and sexuality. While I have discussed the phallic-centric imagery as potentially reifying the Black Arts Movement's disquieting conflation of black liberation with black male sexuality, might we read it differently if the last moments in the poem are considered within the framework of what Darieck Scott calls embracing extravagant abjection. In *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African-American Literary Imagination*, Scott challenges the notion that the black past, that of a history of domination, subordination, and hypersexualization, should be understood as something that needs to be overcome, a rupture that requires redressing. Scott wonders if in entering into black abjection, if in the re-articulating and re-imagining the domination as a site of pleasure and political empowerment, there might be a whole discursive body of knowledge that might produce the liberation that is sought. The persona in this poem, Hayes himself, could be entering the discussion of the hypersexualized black male in just this manner—as one embracing abjection. Hayes's body becomes a participant in the chain of speech-acts; in some ways, he becomes a creator rather than one that is created. He disrupts the 'smooth narrative' of the black body being merely a site of pleasure for white enjoyment.

Making the reader aware of the poet as the controller and a controlling presence in the fabrication of the text resides as part of Terrance Hayes project along with discussing race and racial identity in new and expansive ways, but the poet as a fixture in the poem occupies more of a center-stage position in Jericho Brown's debut collection of poetry, *Please.* In poems like "Betty Jo Jackson" and "Again," Brown thrusts his authorial presence as well as his corporeality in the reader's face immediately. In "Betty Jo Jackson," Brown writes:

"There's a story my father likes to tell.

Never mind. My father's never been good
At stories, and I wouldn't want you calling me
A gossip. Besides, this is about my mother.
I wouldn't want you calling her fool? How
Might you have handled things? You see
Your man approached by a girl whose hair is longer
Than her skirt. Well, Mama was nicer
Than you…" (ll.1-8; 48).

The poem starts in medias res. It seems as the poem has already begun. This conversation that is already happening, for which we, the reader, unwittingly participated in before the poem started highlights the performative aspect of the poem. In fact, performance is its primary purpose. However, this is not a performance of one; it is a co-performance similar to jazz musicians that take soloing and improvisation queues from the audience and their fellow musicians. This poem will not perform correctly without a reader, without the participation of the reader as signaled with the "never mind" and the question "how might you have handled things." The "never mind" also establishes the hemming and hawing, the deliberation of the speaker. In the speaker seeking to retell this story, he vacillates about which perspective to tell it from; should it be told from the close-third person narrative position of his father or that of his mother? In this vacillation, in this tension is the lyric moment. It is also the moment of aporia. And this indecisive moment beckons back to Plato's *Meno* with the reader playing the part of Meno and Brown playing the role of Socrates. This also points to another feature of the poem; that it seems to be coalescing and riffing upon the dramatic monologue and the apostrophe. The "never mind" coupled with the aporia undercut the narrative impulse and expectation of the poem. This undercutting is on purpose. It's a moment of speakerly or authorial intentionality—the desire to show a text (in this case the father's narrative) to contain indeterminacy, to be lacking because it cannot fully explain the lack of fight in

the speaker's mother. Brown points to the failure of this narrative's ability to properly transmit emotional resonance, and subsequently he gestures to the failure of narrative as well as the failure of memory.

"Betty Jo Jackson" is not the only poem in which Brown employs doubt and aporitic discourse as a means of subverting narrative and discussing the fragility and inadequacy of memory. In "Again," Brown begins by drawing the reader's attention to his speakerly presence as a poet. In so doing, he positions the reader as what Seamus Heaney calls "the artful voyeur." Brown writes: "[y]ou are not as tired of the poem / As I am of the memory" (17). With the word poem appearing in the first line of the poem, Brown signals to his reader that the materials and tradition of poetry will be held in question. This bit of self-consciousness alerts the reader that this poem will comment on itself as its being made. In so doing, the poet removes the veneer of artifice, thus, making the reader a fellow conspirator in the making of the verse; however, the reader becomes something more akin to a nagging critic who sits on one's shoulder and says "that's already been done before." The reader must share in the pain of the memory as Brown writes or, better yet, performs this poem. If Brown must write it, then the reader must feel it. In other words, the reader must conspire; Brown points to the conspiratorial nature of the language of the poem when he writes:

> "…In the dark
> We make a few blocks
> Around the one-story neighborhood
> That I loved
> Though Nothing I've written
> Tells you this…
> Give a man a minute
> She's asleep and I'm typing it

All over again…
I should have told you this
Lines ago…
Another awful father
Scarring this page too—…" (ll. 13-48,15).

While the poem presents the well-trod subject of domestic violence and how this violence is inherited by the off-spring in the form of witnessing and testimony, the poem critiques itself and its efforts of presenting well-worn subject matter. In the acknowledging of 'another awful father scarring the page,' Brown alludes to Slyvia Plath's "Daddy" and the over-abundant tradition of the elegies dedicated to mis-parenting. Despite Brown being aware of this well-traveled road, he feels compelled to write his own poem, but he's willing to ironize and signify upon his engagement as a way of writing through this dilemma. Brown's poem also seeks to address the two conventions of poetry that shape attitudes toward contemporary poetics that might dismiss this poem as being outdated or sentimental—the New Critical notion of the intentional fallacy and the contemporary poetry world's distrust of the confessional lyric.

However, Brown's critique must be framed within the context of the African-American tradition of signifying as presented in *The Signifying Monkey* by Henry Louis Gates. According to Gates, "Signifying is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical figures, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyberpole, litotes, and metalepsis…" Gates goes on to assert that "to this list we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and cathecresis, all of which are used in the ritual of signifying" (904). Gates defines the ritual of signifying as punning upon received tropes, a method of "'indirect argument of persuasion'" (Gates qtd. by Abrahams 906). This punning, however, departs from traditional notions of signifying in the western literary canon. This version of signifying empties out the signifier of its meaning and

refills it with culturally black material, language, or meaning. This refilling and punning takes several forms. One of these forms is called loud-talking. Loud-talking does not actually mean to speak loudly. When one loud-talks, one speaks of a second-person to a third person while the second person is in ear-shot. It is a type of "obscuring the addressee" (Gates 263). One knows one has loud-talked successfully if the person being talked about asks, "What?" to which the response is, "I wasn't talking to you" (Gates 263). Signification is about the playful and purposeful subversion of received linguistic markers of signifier and signified. In the case of Brown's "Again" and "Betty Jo Jackson," Brown performs a type of loud-talking and critique in that he wants the reader to be aware that he is aware that these types of poems have been written before; subsequently, this act reifies of the poet's presence. He does not want these poems to be understood without the corporeality of his body—think an updated version of Frederick Douglass telling his reader that as a young slave "my feet have been so cracked with frost, that the pen with which I am writing could fit in the gashes" (Douglass 59). Just as Douglass wanted his reader to be aware of the maker, both his subjectivity and his position as an object who resists, Brown is engaging in a similar endeavor. Obscuring the poet, the persona, the body is not the goal.

Brown uses doubt to build an authorial self and subjectivity in the poem that can't be ignored as the poem proceeds. In other words, the doubt makes the poet more visible. As the poem, "Again," falls down the page in a single strophe, the reader understands the poem is being made for them, with their biases and intellectual predilections in mind. Brown's persona constantly apologizes for the poem and the memory of familial violence inflicted upon the reader, yet he proceeds with the telling. And at the same time he proceeds with the telling, he does not tell every detail. The reader never hears or experiences the father's slapping of the mother. In the

lines "My mother loves her husband / And his hands/ Even if laid heavy against her," the reader gets an ambiguous phrase that points to abuse but does not directly state it as such (16). Again, an exercise of control. This is a willful authorial ambiguity, an act of authorial intrusion pushing its way through the veneer of a well-wrought verse. Brown's control and deployment of these intrusions coupled with his attention to the materials of poetry—the line, forced enjambments that sonically and rhythmically enact pathos—point the well-read reader to the beleaguering albatross of the intentional fallacy and how it figures in the reading of contemporary poets when part of a writer's project might be visibility in the face of erasure. For instance, in poems like "Why I Cannot Leave You" (which I have attached) and the previously discussed "Betty Jo Jackson," part of Brown's poetics is rendering the unseen people of the working class seen and poetic as well as giving artistic space for queer eroticism. Both of these aesthetic goals have been taken up individually before but rarely have they been taken up in the same book or in the space of the same poem. Thus visibility is paramount.

Brown's "Again" shows adept use of prosodic and tropological figuration, a keen awareness of what has canonically preceded it, and an adroit deployment of line breaks that reconstitute the poem in surprising and rewarding ways, yet this poem might be considered less than stunning because of its speaker's/author's persistent refusal to disappear. Here, authorial intent, the process by which the poem appears before the reader, matters as much as the poem and its preponderance of itself as an artifact. Brown takes his critics and naysayers head-on and subverts their criticism by critiquing the confessional mode of the poem as the poem is confessing. He recognizes the potential for sentimentalizing and essentializing the subject of his poems (i.e. his mother) and

proceeds lyrically with this in mind. Brown loud-talks himself, critiquing the poems artifice as its being erected.

Much like Seamus Heaney's does in his series of Bog poems, Brown attends to the ethics of lyricizing violence. The constant pointing to the materials of poetry—the line, the process of making well-wrought verse—elucidates his understanding of the rupture and potential of re-inscribing violence with beautifully lyric language if not for a careful and self-critiquing pen. Much in the way that Heaney makes self-correcting gestures, implicating himself as a conspirator in the potential violence, similarly Brown creates asides and implicates himself in the violence through testifying and listening to his parents making love after their violent spat.

The doubt and critique of the confessional mode while yet performing it is not only an aesthetic and intellectual engagement but also a highly political engagement. Brown does not stop his interrogation and subversion of New Critics and their readings, but he also challenges black nationalists' aesthetic ideas of poetry, particularly those proffered by the Black Arts Movement. During the Black Arts Movement (BAM), the poet, writer, and artist were to put the community and the community's concerns at the front of the art. The individual was supposed to fall back to the periphery while the community's struggles stood center-stage. Often, individual identity was lost and subsumed under this mantle of moving 'the people' forward. While Brown shows himself concerned with the same plights—racism, black communal ideas of love, the black family—he refuses to relinquish the individual and petit narrative to the grand narrative of black, social and political uplift. Instead, he resurrects black identity from the mire of a nationalistic sty and asserts that these poems do not merely advance a political agenda, but they advance an aesthetic dialogue,

and make way for the idea that writing a poem about family drama is as political as a poem about the atrocities of racism, slavery, and Jim Crow.

Brown also refuses to bow to Black Nationalist pressures when it comes to language and the essentialist notion that in order for a poem to be black the language must be "black." He speaks to and against Baraka's assertion that black expression, if it truly seeks to be expression of black people, must vocalize and announce itself in the language of 'the people.' The language must "kill" (read 'the man'). While this declaration does seek to validate the folk expressions of black folks, it also cordons off and banishes literature and cultural expressions of blackness that borrow or use other (read white) forms. While Brown does employ black dialectical speech in "Again" in the line describing him and his mother walking around the block after they have escaped his father's last attempt of abuse—"[w]e make a few blocks"—Brown shows an awareness of Plath and her "Daddy" poems when he writes: "[a]nother awful father/ scarring this page too—…." Brown pulls from the whole canon rather than writing from a particular set of materials. These acts of allusions are not new. The Harlem Renaissance writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer borrowed from their white, modernist counterparts, but with the advent of the Black Arts and Black National Movements of the 1960s, this type of literary swapping became less fashionable and politically forward. Brown, however, does take this tradition of literary swapping a little further as manifested in his awareness of how his poems fit inside the canon. In "Track 5: Summertime," for instance, a poem in the voice of Janis Joplin, Brown alludes to both Li Young Lee's poem "Persimmons" and the traditional gospel hymn "His Eye is on the Sparrow." Brown positions his poems in the overlap between cultures as a way of melding without melting borders or particularity. Much in the way that Eliot or Pound understood their poems to be opening some

much needed space in the English-language literary canon, Brown's use of control and doubt as expressed in his speaking back to literary traditions changes his borrowing from mere fan worship to a persistent re-shaping of received ideas of poetry.

Both Brown and Hayes incorporate the impulses that surround and beleaguer the aesthetic ideologies of both the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement; however, they look back at the tradition askance, making sure not to wield any ideology or aesthetic without a healthy dose of doubt. Both poets seek a type of poetic expression that embraces the complexity of the American legacy, particularly a black American legacy that constantly shifts and requires reworking, revising, and, in the demotic of the day, remixing. This being betwixt and between tradition, inhabiting the voice and body of 'the people' and inhabiting the poetics of the canon (read white canon) are not acts of a conflicted consciousness or aesthetic. Rather than abiding by the sense of double-consciousness made famous by W.E.B. Du Bois, these poets understand the split, the crack as the place upon which to build and further black aesthetics. Hayes and Brown's poems assert that the rift is the whole in and of itself; the break is the most stable ground from which to build a poem. In other words, there is no rift or fracturing but a plethora of poetic and cultural pieces that when embraced create an expansive poetics, a poetics both bound and yet full of possibility.

Conclusion: Ten Fictitious Essays for the Surreal, Old-Fashioned Future: Towards a New Criticism

Often, when writing scholastically—scholarly articles, chapters, and books—the conversation of that chapter or article begins to point to other conversations, point to divergent discussions, point to other potentially lit and sometimes dark corridors of inquiry. Thinking through an argument is not a linear process even though it gets represented as such in mainstream and traditional notions of academic writing. We, scholars, do not often follow these threads of potential conversation. We leave them as fragments in the margins and marginalia of our drafts and notebooks for another day, another project, a follow-up article, maybe the epilogue or conclusion of the present, pressing project. Maybe a footnote. This conclusion acts as an antidote to the disease of dismissal.

In "Ten Fictitious Essays for the Surreal, Old-Fashioned Future: Towards A New Criticism," I create a scholastic wish-list of sorts. The goal of this wish-list is to outline a series of articles, book chapters, essays that contain critiques and arguments that have yet to be mapped onto the critical landscape of American literature. I imagine these essays to be something that a future graduate student in the year 2050 might write for a dissertation, book chapter, or article. And quite literally, I use the artifice of narrative and persona in this essay—again reinforcing the hybridity of this dissertation. However, reinforcing the hybridity of scholarly inquiry for hybridity sake is not the point. Hybridity for hybridity sake is rather superficial, superfluous, and a type of editorial activism that ultimately denudes the power and potential of the intellectual inquiry, an activism that

I am not interested in. I use persona and strategies of narration as a means of subverting the disembodied voice and nature of main-stream scholarship.

Scholarly articles, books, and essays seem as though they are prophetically belted out in one, long well-stated utterance. Scholarly articles and the scholarly voices and bodies behind them do not nap, stutter, eat, buy groceries, or do laundry. Their pronouncements are oracular, coming from Tiresias-like omniscience. In establishing the corporeality of the speaker of these essays, my aim is to bring the body, in all of its funk and disorder, back into scholarship. *While scholars like Elaine Scarry, Hortense Spillers, and Dariek Scott discuss the body—the black body, the pained and diseased body, the gendered black body, the abject, black queer body—these scholars' bodies or the scholarly persona-bodies barely, if ever, become part of the theorizing*. While this distance or disavowal of the body allows the argument to be encountered in a less complicated manner, the distance of the body from the scholarship also aids in marginalizing the body thus re-instituting and re-inscribing notions of the center and margin, privilege and constraint, a dialectic that seeks to institute a purification to the impure process of scholarship, writing, and thinking. In my invoking a persona in the form of a graduate student, I offer a body that must be contended with, a body whose motion is in conversation with the scholarship, with the process of scholarly creation. Thus, I move away from the omniscient narrator and the potential God-trick that it enables. In moving away from this omniscience, the text has a potential to subvert notions of authority, elitism, and insiderism.

Through introducing narrative, causality, a character, this conclusion also seeks to boundary cross. The boundary it seeks to cross is that of accessibility. Too often the pertinence, the necessity of scholarly arguments for a larger reading public is obscured through the discourse, the expected linguistic erudition, through the winking and nodding that scholars pitch in the direction

of others scholars. I want to make it clear that I am not championing the notion of making the inquiry less rigorous; however, I am interested in a performing rigor without performing exclusion. And one way of subverting the hermetically-sealed discourse of the Academy and the scholar is to use the artifice of narrative. Critical race theorist Patricia Williams in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of Law Professor,* African Diaspora theorist M. Jacqui Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, and African-American Studies critic Saidiya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother: Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Right* embrace this narrative method in exploring the complicated and nuanced interactions and intersections of race, rights, citizenship, subjectivity (embodied and disembodied), migration, nomadism, gender, tourism, and exile. These three books do not broker in the notion that erudition and rigor come at the price of accessibility. Through the retelling of teaching a contract law class at Columbia University and running into homeless man on the streets on the way to class, Williams links the complicated circumstance of citizenship and visibility to the owning of things (contracts). Concomitantly, Alexander explores the subjectivity of the sacred while also discussing the travails and ethics of archival research. Hartman explores the complicated passages of Africans moving and migrating through the Diaspora while recounting her time in Ghana on a fellowship. These three scholars are able to move in and out of thinking through philosophically and theoretically dense material narratively. The narrative trajectory of the inquiries embeds the difficult questions, answers, and conclusions in the journey of the persona. This approach allows the reader to come upon the discoveries and insights with the persona. The scholarship performs a type of co-performativity. The scholarship performs in concert and in response to the narrative. And the narrative is concomitantly concerned with performing in concert with the reader. The reader is not

made into a passive receptacle of an oracular utterance. Instead, the scholarship inhabits the space of imagination, the space of what if, the fiction space of possibility.

This space of possibility is the impetus behind this chapter. This conclusion is in an experiment in the speculative. Much like Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber,* Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talent,* this chapter is interested in speculating the future of scholarship, the future of (Black) Western Thought. Scholarship and scholarly inquiry rarely, if ever, speculates about the future because of the dependence upon evidence. Everything must be dead or past in order for it to be known. But what exactly is that type of knowing? How can one walk forward always looking behind you? Here is an attempt to glance both forward and back.

Literary Kinship Networks: Terrance Hayes, Nikki Giovanni, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Dean Young, the New York School, and the Black Arts Movement: Towards a New Criticism

In the year 2050, a graduate student—let's call him Theophilus Sunday—notices that John Ashbery blurbs Terrance Hayes's third collection, *Wind in the Box*, and wonders if there is any affinity between their work. As a fan and scholar of Hayes work, Sunday also notices that Hayes tends to defy nationalistic borders, crossing back and forth between black literary and oral traditions and white literary traditions of the late twentieth century. For instance, Sunday argued in a seminar paper in his first African-American literature seminar on late twentieth century African-American poetry and poetics that Hayes embodies both the poetics of Frank O'Hara (I-do-this-I do-that) and the poetics of Giovanni (ego-tripping and waltzing) simultaneously in "What I Am" and "Morning Poem," poems from his first collection *Muscular Music.* In his seminar paper, Sunday explores the use of a queer poetics of O'Hara and Giovanni in the "straight" poetry of Hayes. For

Sunday, this move by Hayes was again another defying of borders, a self-fashioning of Hayes to create a kinship network of influences that wallow in the abjection and anxiety of influence. However, Hayes does not manifest the anxiety of influence that was discussed by the late twentieth century scholar Harold Bloom in *An Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Hayes poetry does not suffer from being derivative to his predecessors as Bloom asserts, but instead, Hayes embraces the abjection of influence. Here's where Sunday expands the first seminar paper into an article-length paper and expands upon the idea of the abjection of influence. In the third collection, the John Ashbery-blurbed *Wind in a Box*, Sunday would like to argue that Hayes "Blue Borges," "Blue Bowie," "Blue Baraka," and "Blue Etheridge" poems function as homage to these artistic predecessors but they are also corrections and extensions of these artists' poetics and aesthetics. And these poems offer the poet, a space to negotiate and patch together a kinship network of influence. Sunday would like to begin this essay with a witty anecdote about Hayes finding a Frank O'Hara poem stuck to the bottom of his shoe while shooting hoops with some friends on an outdoor basketball court beneath a canopy of pines in his home state of South Carolina. Instead, the essay begins with an exploration of a large block quote from Eleanor Berry's essay "The Free Verse Spectrum." The bloc quote reads:

> "To choose to write a poem in a particular kind of verse is not simply to choose a particular set of technical tools; it is also to associate oneself with particular predecessors—with their worldviews and with the themes of their poetry. One cannot write blank verse without reminding readers familiar with the English poetic tradition of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth…Such associations may either extend the thematic territory claimed by the predecessor or implicitly dispute his or her worldview, but they are themselves inevitable and undeniable" (875).

Sunday quickly summarizes Berry's position in the introductory paragraph and declares, to his Dear Reader, that he seeks to inhabit and complicate Berry's position through the work of Hayes. Sundays asks the question how does Hayes 'extend the thematic territory of his predecessors or implicitly dispute his predecessors' worldview.' How does this tracking Hayes through the prosodies of free verse poetry complicate our notion of literary kinship and kinship networks. What is the significance of Hayes bringing Nikki Giovanni, Frank O'Hara, Audre Lorde, John Ashbery into relation? And how might bringing these literary predecessors into relation bring Hayes into relation with poets of his generation such as Dean Young or Tony Hoagland? After Sunday defines literary kinship and literary kinship networks as a response to Bloom's anxiety of influence, Sunday explores Hayes wallowing in abjection. Framing the discussion of abjection with Julia Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror,* Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African-American Literary Imagination,* and Roger Reeves's book chapter on playing in the dark rather playing with the dark in *Black Western Thought: Toward a Theory of Black Citizen-Objects*, Sunday explores the imagination as synonymous with abjection. The imagination, the imagination of Hayes's poems in particular, are not interested in purity but in the messy, the hybrid, the funky.

Sunday touches his Ipod. The late twentieth century soul ensemble, P-Funk, fills his apartment with deep bass riffs by Bootsie Collins. As he nods his head, his eyes closed, he can see Andre Foxx walking into a concert wearing a wedding gown. Andre Foxx wearing a wedding gown reminds him of Terrance Hayes's "All the Way Live" from *Lighthead*, his National Book Award-winning fourth book. In "All the Way Live" two 1960s, Black Panther-throw-back-all-the-way-live revolutionaries walk down the street wearing poodle skirts and wigs. Yes, they are cross-dressing

revolutionaries. Bad brothers in drag, spray-painting "NEGROPHOBIA" on a statue of Robert E. Lee and daring the police to shoot. Sunday's critical light turns on. This is the abjection and revolution Hayes embraces. It's not his father's Black Power Movement. Unlike his father's Black Power Movement, a revolutionary can cross-dress and be all-the-way-live and all-the-way-down. Queer folk are welcome. In fact, for Hayes, without queering the revolution, we will have no revolution. Hayes envisions a community, a black community that embraces the funky, the skewed—what might not always be respectable. Sunday begins to wonder if this notion expansive community could be applied to a general idea of literary kinship and community. Does Hayes see himself as kin with poets like Ashbery, Young, or Hoagland? How might Hayes be queering queer? Sunday's head begins to ache. He turns P-Funk up a bit, closes his eyes, and thinks this is enough for now.

A Mystifying Silence: Bigger, Blacker, Prufrockian: Towards a New Poetics, or There Would Be No *Fight Club* Without Eliot and Prufrock: Towards a New Poetics

In the fall semester, Sunday decided to take a seminar on the long twentieth century which put more Modernism in his shopping cart than he would have liked. But when you're at the cashier, sometimes you just have to go ahead and make the purchase. And so, Theophilus Sunday did. Every Tuesday evening, he watched the sun set red against the capital building gold's dome and pondered the fragments of ruins of the nineteenth century and how very white they were. It was now December, the fall semester ending, and it was time to produce a seminar paper. The course ended with Don DeLilo's *White Noise*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, and Lyn Heijinian's *My Life*. The washing machine thumping in the background, Sunday sat at his writing desk trying to reason through an argument on the relationship between Eliot's early twentieth century meditations on

ruin and contemporary, white male novelists meditations on the dangerous times of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Sunday felt these writers were all writing about whiteness and the decreasing amount of privilege their skin afforded them while at the same time articulating something about a type of boredom, a malaise that was omnipresent. Is this whiteness—ennui? Sunday remembered an article he read a few months back in an old literary journal called the *American Poetry Review*. Zipping through the online catalogs, Sunday found the article and began scribbling. The essay arrived along with a thud and sputter from the washing machine.

Unlike this last essay, this essay would begin with an anecdote that references and is in conversation with Major Jackson's article, "A Mystifying Silence: Big and Black" in the September / October 2007 issue of *American Poetry Review.* In the article, Jackson ask his reader why white writers do not engage questions of race more often in their work. Sunday recounts for the reader sitting at a bar drinking Dogfish Head 90 minute IPA and Brother Thelonius, a Belgian-style abbey ale, with some of his graduate cohort. The bar fraying along the red and green neon signs advertising Heineken and Pearl Beer, a few cigarettes dangling from mouths, the warmth of graduate school poverty and privilege insulating each body leaning over a black table that looks as if some sort of monster has taken a bite out of one of the corners, Sunday, smiling and feeling the chumminess of the beer, asks his white friends, who happen to be poets in the MFA program, why it is they never write about race. He's read their poems in workshop, heard them read in various reading series and living rooms, and he cannot remember one poem that grapples in any way with race. And with the R-word (race), his white friends pull back from the table. The smoke that passed between them collectively seemed to be reclaimed by the individual that originally blew it. A few fumbled at answers, but they quickly turned the conversation to John Berryman and his

deployment of syntax that beckoned back to Shakespeare and Gerald Manly Hopkins. The regular graduate student angst is replaced with a different angst, a stronger angst. Finally one of his friends asked, "aren't we trying not to see race; isn't the goal to move beyond that?" In his essay on "Prufrock" and *Fight Club*, Sunday explores his friends' angst. Sunday surmises that their angst stems from an assumption concerning writing on race—the assumption being that when one is writing about race, one is actually writing about racism which cannot be further from the truth. Often, race and racism are conflated, but they are not inextricably linked. Sunday asserts that one can write about the practice and technologies of race without writing about racism. Though writing about race without writing about racism may seem difficult, the endeavor might prove very productive in extricating and rescuing cultural ideas of aesthetics from being merely cast off as "identity politics" and therefore not worth a damn. Sunday notes that too often aesthetics that intersect with race in explicit terms become unfairly characterized as an extension of political discourse as though aesthetics aren't always in relationship to "politics" and market. As Eleanor Berry notes in the "Free Verse Spectrum," any aesthetic choice carries with it a linguistic and political history along with an ideological history as well. All decisions are political decisions. All political decisions are aesthetic decisions as well.

Feeling quite the philosopher, Sunday turns the paper back to Major Jackson and some of his argumentation in "A Mystifying Silence." Sunday notes that even though Jackson argues for the writing about race without the writing about racism, he, himself, succumbs to the conflation of race and racism in his own article. All of his examples of white poets writing about race are actually white poets confessing to or creating persona that confess to moments in which they recognized complicity in receiving white privilege or consciously reacting to and reproaching themselves for

reacting to media-driven stereotypes of black folks as criminals or troglodytes. While this investigation of white privilege is laudable and necessary, none of the examples were of whites writing self-consciously about being white or whiteness. Just when Sunday's critique seems like it is heading for the sharp and destructive rocks of self-righteousness, he abruptly turns the conversation towards Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* and T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock." Don't ask me how Sunday pulls it off, but he does; he's one of those brilliant acolyte students that Boethius and Maimonides would have gladly welcomed into the fold of their respective schools. If I had to fathom a guess, Sunday probably turned the conversation in the direction of Eliot and Pound by announcing that he began to think about the American Modernist canon as a white place and space, as much of a cultural space as a barbershop or MLK Boulevard in Atlanta, Georgia. Sunday argues that whiteness is always being written about; however, because whiteness is understood as normal, as universal, as an embodiment of the Hegelian unlimited consciousness, whiteness loses its situated-ness and becomes the default. In becoming the default, whiteness, then, loses its rhetoricity, loses its status as contingent and becomes fact, omnipresent, and certain. And this unchecked certainty gets reified and re-inscribed in the discourse of canon and the performing of literary-ness. Sunday announces that he would like to think of whiteness through discussions of ennui and disillusionment in the work of Modernist Pound and Eliot. Sunday acknowledges discussions of disillusionment in Modernist poetry are a well-trod and well-worn path. However, discussions of ennui and disillusionment as it connects to Modernist angst and race (whiteness) are not trod in the least bit. Sunday imagines his white friends wrinkling their brows and pulling very long sips of their beer which of course causes Sunday to dig in a little further; he thinks of the end of Seamus Heaney's "Digging" and, with the squat pen between his fingers, he

continues to dig. Sunday argues that Eliot's Prufrock, Eliot's own disillusionment with the changing world, and Pound's hysterical, heretical, and anti-Semitic ravings in the *Pisan Cantos* anticipate and prefigure the popular literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century concerning the angst and anger of white men. Sunday notes that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, what scholars might call the long twentieth century, novels like Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* dominated the literary marketplace. Sunday wants to investigate if what primes the pump for such a reception can be traced back to Modernist disillusionment as evinced in the work of Eliot and Pound. Sunday asks: "wouldn't it be an interesting and fruitful to read Prufrock as a literary predecessor to the disgruntled white men of *Fight Club*? Now wouldn't that be fun." Indeed, Mr. Sunday, that would be fun. Sunday throws his head back and laughs maniacally. The washing machine convulsing to the right of his writing desk shoves him out of his moment of exegetical ecstasy. Sunday continues. He outlines the rest of the essay in which he explores homsocial bonding rituals in the work of Eliot, Pound, and Palahnuik. Despite it being critically gauche, Sunday plans to explore Pound and Eliot's relationship as manifested in their letters, re-read the act of writing the *Pisan Cantos* as an act of anger, re-reading them against Pound's own declaration that this was the most tranquil time in his life (because let's face it: sitting in a cage in the sun for several days would drive anybody angry and mad). Don't ask me how Sunday does all this, but he does it. The washing machine slows to slow whirl. Sunday pounds the top of his head with his fist, walks to washing machine, quickly reaching into its guts and removing his mangled t-shirts, throwing them into the cave of the dryer before unsightly wrinkles can settle in.

Toni Morrison Reads the Dark in the New Critics: Toward a New Criticism, or Toni Morrison, the New Critics, the Boogie Man and Robert Penn Warren: Towards a New Criticism

Sunday begins this essay in a less erudite place than the last two essays. This essay begins with a lot of cussing at the New Critics. Sunday, a graduate scholar interested in African-American literature, theory, post-structuralism, and poetics, believes his critical mission is to revise previous theories on reading and analysis that embody and engender exclusionary practices of reading, hearing, and interpreting. And the New Critics and New Criticism is such paradigm. Upon reading Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" and Robert Penn Warren's "Pondy Woods" (in "Pondy Woods," a buzzard comments to a black man "Nigger, your breed ain't metaphysical"), Sunday starts to fray at his critical edges. However, rather than allowing this frustration to seize him utterly and completely, he turns toward a critic who could elucidate the exclusion of black people from critical and creative spaces while brushing her teeth: Toni Morrison. Using Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* and her investigation into the explicit and implicit boogie-men of American literature, Sunday feeds New Critically-revered literature and criticism through this strainer looking for the ways in which New Criticism plays with the dark, renders darkness and blackness as sublime, terrifying, and terrible. An early passage in Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* offers Sunday a starting point for his own argument. Morrison argues: "Just as nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so did the literature [Sunday adds "and its criticism"], whose founding characteristics extend to the twentieth century [Sunday adds "twenty-first century"], reproduce necessity for codes and restrictions" (6). Sunday offers that these codes and restrictions manifest not only in the literature and criticism but inside poetry workshops which are a vernacular or ground-

level form of scholarship. Sunday takes up more Morrison's mission of seeking out and interrogating "agendas in criticism" (Morrison 8). Sunday outlines a series of questions he would like this essay to answer. What is the legacy of New Criticism in poetry workshops and poetry criticism? How does New Criticism as an approach support a type of whitening of experience, whitening of poetry? What are the implications of the buzzard's declaration that blackness is a "breed" and that it's not "metaphysical." How might this agenda of casting blackness, black people, and black intellectual and aesthetic productions as lacking a metaphysical landscape participate in mis-reading, mis-hearing, and mis-encountering of black discursive bodies of knowledge? Sunday pushes his chair back from the writing desk and bangs his forehead against his keyboard—"hgaiuiu" shows up on the screen. FLARF.

"I need a new profession," Sunday whispers to the long-haired cat that has come up from beneath the bed. Needing a break, Sunday closes his laptop and listens to the dryer tumble him into a comfortably numb oblivion. Mr. Sunday will need an extension on this essay.

Natasha Trethewey and the Pastoral Sonnet as Weapon and Social Activisim: Towards a New Poetics

This essay would begin with a discussion of the highly traditional prosodies of Natasha Trethewey's Pulitzer Prize winning *Native Guard*. Sunday illustrates the fluidity with which she moves between forms like the sonnet, pantuoum, ghazal, including the black literary-music form of the blues or blues stanza. This essay also illustrates her use of accentual syllabic verse as well as syllabic verse, features that the New Critics as well as New Formalists would find highly pleasing. However, what might also be discussed is how Trethewey's poems seek to recover lost history, particularly the history of black soldiers of the Civil War in her native Mississippi. Sunday,

subversively and snarkily, asks WWNCD—What Would New Critics Do? How would they respond to this enactment of history, poetry, and activism? In this essay, Sunday argues that Trethewey's non-traditional subject matter inhabiting traditional prosodies produces a volatility that we have not seen since Phillis Wheatley troubled Boston, its eighteenth century publishing scene, and the eighteen, aristocratic gentlemen of Boston-Brahmin birth. This essay might ask what are the aesthetic and political implications of a poem like "Pastoral," a poem in which the persona, a mixed-race woman, invites herself into a conversation between the Fugitive Poets—Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell, Cleanth Brooks, and Allen Tate, invites herself into a conversation about poetics and the South. Because of the poem's brevity, Sunday reproduces the whole poem inside the text of his essay.

Pastoral

In the dream, I am with the Fugitive
Poets. We're gathered for a photograph.
Behind us, the skyline of Atlanta
hidden by the photographer's backdrop—
a lush pasture, green, full of soft-eyed cows
lowing, a chant that sounds like *no, no*. *Yes*
I say to the glass of bourbon I'm offered.
We're lining up now—Robert Penn Warren,
his voice just audible above the drone
of bulldozers, telling us where to stand.
Say "race," the photographer croons. I'm in
Blackface again when the flash freezes us.
My father's white, I tell them, *and rural.*
You don't hate the South? they ask. *You don't hate it?*

Sunday argues that Trethewey's hard and torqued enjambments, the use of irony and double entendres ("I'm in / Blackface again when the flash freezes us."), and subversion of the pastoral ("the drone / of bulldozers") performs more than a challenging or transgressing of

received, formal, and mannerly verse; Sunday argues that Trethwey's inhabiting of form performs a radical act of 'bulldozing' the very landscape that she inhabits. Trethewey's inhabiting is a haunting and hellified demolition ball aimed at the poetic fathers of her birth. In this way, her "pastoral" has more in common with Amiri Baraka's "Black Art." However, because of the veneer of Southern politeness, the sonnet form, the title pointing us to a Western aesthetic tradition, and the accentual syllabics, the poem is not read as incendiary or subversive. With the help of the title, the poem masquerades as mannerly. But the mask and gown and manners begin to fall immediately with the first line and its end word—"Fugitive." Nothing about fugitivity screams safety. And, it also seem rather dangerous for anybody to be in a field by themselves with anybody who self-declares themselves fugitive let alone a mixed-race woman in a field with a gaggle of white men. In fact, this moment signifies on some of our worst American historical realities—a black woman alone in a field with a group of white men. This scene does not conjure up images of safety in the imaginative, literary, or real world. Sunday directs his reader to the enjambment of the first line. The word "Fugitive" enacts a temporary menace that resolves itself only slightly when the reader understands the word "Fugitive" to be a modifier of the word "Poet." The reader must still contend with the haunting of the menace from the previous line. After Sunday discusses the allegorical significance of fugitiveness in the poem, he turns the discussion towards Trethewey's subversion of the pastoral as form and asks his reader: what is a bulldozer doing in a pastoral? A bulldozer in a pastoral seems menacing and potentially dangerous to cows, sheep, and shepherds alike. Despite this danger, Trethewey's persona / speaker does not flinch. In fact, she remains a willing capture for the camera's gaze. Sunday argues that one should read that allegorically, meta-poetically, and meta-textually, read that as Trethewey demanding that her presence—both bodily and poetically—be

counted and remembered. This demand by Trethewey reiterates Black Arts Movement poets and scholars like Haki Madhubuti, Amiri Baraka, and Hoyt Fuller declaring that black urban orality needs a place in the canon next to white literary-ness. However, Trethewey does not perform her radical subversion via the recognizably avant-garde tactics of rending and tearing at the grammars, technologies, and conventions of the lyric. Trethewey radically re-appropriates the form. To use a politically salient term of the early twenty-first century, Trethewey "occupies" the form much in the manner of those that sat-in and refused to leave Zucotti Park during the Occupy Wall Street moment in 2011. The occupation of formal poetic elements like meter and received forms is similar to prisoners taking over a prison and transforming and re-appropriating the prison as a home rather than place and space of containment.

Amused by the potential reception of this latest essay, Sunday leans back in his chair and laughs to himself. The dryer dings and clicks. Inside, the clothes tumble one last time, the cotton t-shirts and buttons along the cuffs of his shirts gently thudding and clicking against the metal walls of the dryer. Sunday reaches and pulls a chest-full of warm clothes towards him and drops them suddenly. The exegetical angels of literary criticism singing into his ears, he hears the titles of few more essays he would like to write. These are the essays of the old-fashioned future:

1. **Black Male Domesticity in Cornelius Eady's *You Don't Miss Your Water* and Ball Culture in *Paris is Burning*, The Erotics of Care: Towards a New Poetics**
2. **The Panopticon, Biopolitics, Necropolitics in Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*: Toward a New Poetics**
3. **Meta-Text and Footnotes as Panopticon in Junot Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: Towards A New Poetics**
4. **When Cinema, Television, and Social Media are the Literary Ancestors: Towards a New Poetics**
5. **What Has Beauty Ever Done to You: The Mistrust of the Beautiful and Picturesque in Contemporary Poetry: Towards A New Poetics**

6. Let's Keep It Real Real; Spoken-Word and Slam Poetry Will Never Be Allowed into the Academy: Towards a New Poetics

Sunday bangs his head against the keyboard, pushes himself back until his chair rests against the edge of his bed. The warmth from the clothes and the smell of dryer sheets wafts towards him. There are socks that need folding, button-down shirts in need of hanging, wash clothes desperately in disarray. Work. Work.

The essays that our man, Theophilus Sunday, concocts are his attempt at extending and partaking in the conversation of Black Western Thought. These essays willingly embrace the abjection of an intellectual tradition that does not seek to reify normative subjectivity (the quest of humanity). These essays relish in their perversion, in the striking down of manners and mannerliness. Let us hope Sunday comes—one day.

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